The MANSE at BARREN ROCKS

A. B. CUNNINGHAM

70 4c

THE MANSE AT BARREN ROCKS

ALBERT BENJAMIN CUNNINGHAM

THE MANSE AT BARREN ROCKS

BY

ALBERT BENJAMIN CUNNINGHAM

301

1918

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

Copyright, 1918,
By George H. Doran Company

Printed in the United States of America

THE MANSE AT BARREN ROCKS

2134882

Prologue

WEST VIRGINIA! What that name calls up! In the early days but an extremity of a great commonwealth, in the mighty upheaval it was separated and became an independent state.

For long after the separation, it remained a country of narrow valleys and forbidding hills, little sought after and little desired. But when its timber found ready market, when the hidden lakes of oil were discovered and the long rich veins of coal were found, it became the point of interest for a type of keen and calculating mind. The promoter, the money-getters, hordes of self-seekers, invaded its territory, laid low the mighty trees and disembowled the hills. It became a workshop, grimy, black, outraged. On the mountains the whine of the mills; in the valleys the clatter of drills, and everywhere the dust from the coal.

But West Virginia's sons know her as a different land. To them she is not befouled by the commercial age. They know her as a land of peace, a land where blue rivers serenely flow between the fragrant hills to make the valleys green. To them she is ever the same: white mists hanging over the waters, straight trees unblackened by smoke, shoals murmuring over rounded pebbles, the after-glow shot myriad fingered into the sky, the path of the moon on the waters! She is the land of dreams and of laughter and of love.

Down near the centre of West Virginia, where the railroad has not yet reached nor the appraising eye estimated the natural values, just up beyond the second range of hills, is the little village of Barren Rocks. It is a quaint, quiet little place of a dozen houses or so, nestled at the foot of the mountains. During the warm summer, the creeks go dry, and even the river is rift with white sand bars; here the sand briers grow low and prickly, and off in the valley and on the mountain side the bees drone monotonously on the wild flowers. The boys go barefoot, the men go about their work with genial laziness, and the women rule the home with calm-eyed serenity. Small gardens surround the houses, and the hillsides are ploughed with the shovel plough, planted in corn and hoed by hand.

But in the winter time the habits change. The sun grows cold and distant, and Winter soughs among the hills her old and plaintive cry. Great trees are cut down with an axe for fire wood, and the broad fireplace built of natural stone supplies warmth, a place for roasting chestnuts, and light for the evening lessons. Neighbours gather for checkers, quiltings and the Virginia reel! Spelling matches draw the neighbourhood to the schoolhouse, trapping and fox hunting lure the men to the open, and the mountains along the river echo with the gay laughter of the skater.

It is the free simple life of the hills.

In days not so long gone by, nestling at the foot of the hill where Little Creek flows sturdily out into Elk river, was the old Baptist Manse. It was built of broad oak planks, unpainted and unplaned, boarded up and down. The cracks where they came together were cleated over with narrow strips of weather-boarding, also up and down. The roof was of clapboards, and in many places where they were frayed and rotting, tiny specks of moss had put in appearance. Inside was the living room, and in it the great fireplace; opening off the living room, two bedrooms, and at the back the kitchen, a lean-to, long and low of ceiling. Outside, the yard was green with grass and plantain; in one corner was the great chestnut tree; while beyond the paling gate and the narrow road, Elk river flowed blue and serene.

In this old Manse lived Peter Rhodes, strong of body, clear of eye, a great horseman, an infallible shot with the long rifle, big of heart and full of human sympathy. Affectionately he was called the Parson by the people round about. And then, Anne Rhodes, the mistress of the Manse, frail, delicate, sweet-voiced; and the children, Henry, Margaret, Ben and Little Anne—and this is the story of Ben.

THE MANSE AT BARREN ROCKS

Chapter 1

AT first it was not so bad. A great yellow dog, its toes flaring wide as it forged stubbornly on, its tongue out and lips slithering foam, had gone up the road past our house. Up by the store, Grouchie McRand's dog had attempted to block his way, only to have its nose and lips slit wide by his terrible teeth.

That was about all there was to it at first. A few loungers at the store had noticed the dog, but they paid little attention to him at the time. It was only later that they remembered that he had hardly swerved from the centre of the road, that his eyes were glazed and terrible, and that after biting Grouchie's dog, he had kept on up the lonely path that led into the sombre hills beyond.

But we were soon to find out that it had been no commonplace thing. The next afternoon, as Essie Evans and I were playing down in the road, two men stopped at our gate. They both carried rifles, and looked as if they had travelled far. Father went out to talk to them, and leaving Essie in the road, I went up to them also.

"Seen anything of a big yaller dog go by here?" one asked.

"No, I think not," father answered. "Lost one?"

"Mad dog. Been on the road for days, and bitin' everything he sees."

While the one man talked to father, the other stood near by. His gun stock rested on the ground, and he was leaning easily on it. Suddenly he stood up, rigidly erect, and gazed sharply up the road. I followed his gaze, and saw, up beyond Essie, and bearing swiftly down on us, the unmistakable form of a great yellow dog.

"God! Tom, there he comes now," cried the man, terror in his voice.

Father and the man called Tom whirled quickly about and looked up the road. In some way the dog had turned about, and was doubling on his course of the day before. He was coming straight towards us. With long loping gait, swinging his head from side to side and snapping as he ran, yet seemingly heedless of all he passed, he came swiftly on. There was something so wild, so terrible in the looks of him, that for a moment we all stood as if petrified. Father was the first to recover.

"Good Lord, and the child is right in his path," he cried.

I was simply beside myself with fear, and the sight of Essie right in his path made it all the worse. I just shrieked at her.

"Essie! Come here quick."

Perhaps if I had spoken in a matter-of-fact way, just as if nothing were wrong, she would have come. But it was one of my old tricks to try to fool her by calling as if something awful were about to happen, and then when she ran up scared and breathless, to yell "fooled" at her. She evidently thought that was what I was trying to do now, for she made no move to come.

"There's a mad dog coming," I said again, but she was unimpressed.

"Ain't neither," and she turned her little nose up at me.

But father did not wait to parley. The great yellow dog was coming straight toward us, and there was no time to lose.

"Come, Essie," he cried, running toward her.

"No danger, Parson," Tom spoke up reassuringly. "When he gets a step nearer I'll fetch him down," and he raised his rifle to his shoulder.

But father took no chances. Quickly covering the distance, he snatched Essie up and hurried back. Even before he had reached us, there was the sharp report of a rifle.

I expected to see the dog fall over, for I knew how those muzzle-loading rifles could be loaded to shoot. But he made no sign that he had been hit. Unswerving he came on. Another shot, and this time a slight whine.

He was near us now, very near, and he did not seem badly hurt. Both guns were empty. Our rifle was too far away to be of any advantage. Things were beginning to look serious.

"Get something! Get something and hold him off while I reload," Tom cried, his fingers shaking as he attempted to pour the charge of powder into the muzzle of his gun.

There was a heavy oak bar lying near the gate. Father seized it and lifted it high. I could have screamed with terror, for I was sure he would be bitten. But he stood out well to the centre of the road, and as the great dog came within reach, the heavy bar descended with terrific force. With another slight whine, he fell over, and after a few convulsions was dead.

To this story of his death, there were soon added others of what had been done before his savage rampage was ended. He had bitten cats, dogs, even horses—and somebody, but we could not find out who it was. It was not long before the mad dog scare was almost an epidemic, and I was afraid as I had never been afraid before in my life.

Grouchie's dog was led off and shot, and that evening he came down to sit with me out on the river bank. We did not say much, but now and then he would look down beyond the mouth of Little Creek, and I knew what he was thinking about. They had buried Rover down that way.

I didn't say so, because I thought it would not be just the thing, but I was mighty glad old Bounce had not been bitten. He was my dog, and he was big and lean and scarred. His muscles were hard and he was a great fighter. I had raised him from a little pup. From the time he was a wee little thing with a small soft muzzle and innocent playful eyes, we had been the greatest friends. He soon grew big and strong and could whip any dog in Barren Rocks, but he never snapped at me. I could put my fingers in his mouth. I had done it many times. I had even played doctor with him, and had let on that I was pulling his teeth. He didn't like it very much, for he often looked disgusted. But he never offered to bite. And because he was a great fighter and was my dog and wouldn't bite me, I thought he was wonderful, and was glad he had not been bitten.

But it was over three weeks after the big yellow dog had passed through Barren Rocks, that something very queer happened. It was Sunday. Father had gone to the River appointment, and mother had gone with him. That meant that Margaret was keeping house over Sunday for Hen and me. And when Margaret kept house for us, we usually had a big time. We were having a big time this day.

Several of the boys and girls had come down to spend the afternoon with us, and we were out in the bottom above our house playing blackman when Grouchie suddenly called out excitedly to me.

"Look at Bounce, Ben. What's he doing?"

I looked down next to the house and saw him. He was standing with his legs stiff and rigid, his eyes glazed and glassy, and snapping for all the world as if he were lapping water, only he did not stick out his tongue.

I ran down to him, and called his name. He did not seem to recognise me. The others had stopped playing and circled round to see what the matter was.

"He's mad," Ed Rainey said with conviction.

Henrietta McRand screamed, and all fell back a few steps. I was angry. My dog mad? Of course not!

"Huh! he's not mad. He has something in his throat," and I went up to him.

I ran my hand down his back, and was surprised that he was so rigid. And underneath his skin the muscles seemed to be twitching violently.

"Come, Bounce," I said encouragingly, snapping my fingers above his head.

"Let him alone, Ben, and come on down to the house," and Margaret and the other girls ran away. Some of the boys did too. I appealed to Hen.

"Come here, Hen. He has something in his throat. He's choked."

Hen came and bent over him.

"What you want to do?"

"You hold him while I run my finger down and get what he's choking on."

Hen put his hands on Bounce's back, and I held his head. He was still snapping viciously, and I had a hard time getting my fingers in his mouth. But at last I succeeded, and felt all around for the bone I was sure was there. But I found nothing. Twice, three times, I tried to find it, but failed each time.

Before very long he quit snapping, and went off to the fence and lay down. While we were still talking about him, word came from Grouchie's mother that hogs were in their corn; and he asked us to go and help him put them out.

I jumped at the chance with eagerness. The razorbacks that roamed the woods were forever getting into the corn fields, and one of my biggest tasks was to keep our field clear of them. In this work I had trained old Bounce. Take him to a field and point out a hog, and he knew at once what was expected of him; and he did the job with a thoroughness that left little to be desired.

So calling to him quickly, Grouchie and I started up the hill to the corn field. Bounce followed stupidly. There was none of his old dash about him. On ordinary occasions, he would have run ahead of us, sniffing eagerly for game, barking and yelping. But he followed along behind, as if too weary to exert himself. Once his foot slipped, and he slid far down the hill. I stopped to call him back, but Grouchie went on.

"That dog's mad, Ben. Come on and leave him alone."

"You'll see when we get up to the field," I answered.

Bounce did chase one hog out, almost with all his old dexterity. But when we tried to get him to chase another, he simply would not do it. This filled me with greater alarm than anything else could have done, for I knew how he had loved the task. Grouchie and I put out the rest, and then ran for home as hard as we could go. I myself had come to believe that there was something wrong.

When we got down, we told Hen what had happened. He got a long stout rope, and when, a little later, Bounce walked wearily into the yard, he tied one end securely around his neck, and the other end to a stake near the corner of the house.

He did not seem to mind being tied up. He walked slowly under the edge of the house and lay down. He was still there when we went to bed that night.

Early the next morning I went out to see how he was getting along. He was not there. The rope had been gnawed in two. I called and whistled, but he did not come to me.

When father and mother came home that afternoon, we told them all about it. Father looked grave.

"How did he act when you thought he was choking?"

We told him.

"He was in a fit, boys."

I shuddered. To think of putting my hand into the mouth of a mad dog! That evening he was not back, nor the next. Father made a rule.

"Children, you must not go out of the house after dark, and even in daylight you must not go far away."

Mother told us what they heard up at the River appointment. The yellow dog had bitten many others, and some of them were gone. A few had been killed, but many had got away before their owners realised that they were mad.

To make the matter worse, it was dog days. Every summer, along about the middle of July, the weather was still and warm. The creek almost dried up, and the river was nearly stagnant. We were forbidden to go in swimming while dog days lasted, for father said there was danger.

He told us about dog days: told us that at that time the dog star was in conjunction with the sun; that during the period of the dog days, sores would break out easily, maladies were frequent, and dogs were liable to go mad. The way he talked about the great Dog Star filled me with superstitious terror, and when night would shut us in, I needed no commands to keep me indoors.

The third day Bounce had not returned, and when I went to bed I was literally shaking with terror. I imagined a mad dog under the bed, and jumped so quickly that a slat fell out and clattered on the floor, frightening me all the more. I covered up my head, and almost suffocated.

When at last I went to sleep, I dreamed that old Bounce had come back, and that he was not mad at all. He was out on the river bank, lying there in the moonlight. He was greatly hurt that he had been tied up, watched with suspicion. I thought I saw him there on the bank, his head on his paws, looking down the river. And I felt a great pity for him, and resolved to go out where he was and let him know that he had one true friend.

Still in my dream, I thought I got up from the bed. I tiptoed quietly to the door and peeped into the living room. Father and mother were asleep. I went cautiously to the front door and lifted the latch.

It was beautiful outside. The moon was high, and its soft light plashed gorgeously against the house. I walked down the steps, and out to the gate. Opening it, I went out to the river bank.

But here the dream went a little awry. Bounce was not there as I had thought. I was disappointed. Perhaps he had gone away, and never would return. I felt as if I should like to cry. Poor old Bounce, to be driven from his home! I felt I had been a traitor to a friend.

And then something happened. With a rush my faculties awoke. I was chilly; my feet were wet and cold. This was all I noticed in the first instant of wakefulness. The dream had been so real that the reality did not seem so strange. I looked down the river, down to the big bend where it was swallowed up by the hills.

I realised with a sudden pounding terror that I was awake, and that I was out on the river bank. At first I was stupefied with fear. I did not want to move, lest my movement attract attention. I felt that some vague danger lurked near me. The blood pounding in my ears made me light-headed. I looked over at the house. It was closed and quiet, the dew sparkling on the roof in the moonlight.

I saw something by the gate. I looked closer. It was irregular and dark. It was Bounce. He stood there immovable as a statue, looking steadily in my direction. I wanted to scream, to cry out. I wanted to call for father, but when I tried it, my voice stuck in my throat. Instead of a cry, there was nothing but a hollow rattle.

Bounce never moved. I thought he stood there an eternity. Then like a well regulated machine, he turned and trotted off up the road. I watched him until the night swallowed him up.

It was not until he was out of sight that I sprang up and ran wildly for the house. As I went through the gate, mother opened the front door.

"O, sonnie, sonnie, I dreamed about it," she said rapidly.

I ran straight to her arms, sobbing and shaking with terror. She carried me into the house, and put me in the bed beside her.

It was a long time before I went to sleep, and when I did, it was only to toss restlessly. The next day we got word that Bounce had been seen up in the mountains, and that night he came home.

Father saw him run under the house at dusk, for our house, like most all the others, stood up off the ground. He turned a white face to mother.

"Anne, I saw that dog run under the house."

"O, Tommy, what will we do," and she cast a quick look around. We were all inside.

"I'll have to go up to the store and get some men."

"Do be careful, Tommy."

He went out, and we huddled together in the room. I thought he would never come back. While we were waiting, we heard something bumping against the floor under the house.

"He's in another fit," Hen said.

Soon the bumping ceased, and all was still, save the crying of the whippoorwill up in the mountains. Soon we heard steps approaching.

"Now, boys, he's right under there," we heard father say.

"Got a lantern?" some one asked.

Mother sprang up, and when father opened the door she gave him the lantern. For several minutes we could hear nothing. They were evidently trying to locate him.

The whippoorwill cried out again from the darkness. Then,

"There he is, boys. Right back there. See him?"

There was a shuffling, silence, and then the report of a revolver. The sound was terrific in the room, and, putting my hands to my ears to shut it out, I ran to mother.

We waited again. And again there was a period of silence, broken only by the cry of the whippoorwill. There was another shot, then another and a fourth.

At last we heard the men leaving, and father came in. He went into the kitchen and remained there for some time. He came out, drying his hands on the kitchen towel.

"Did you get him out, Tommy?" mother asked.

"Yes. Out behind the fence. Bury him to-morrow."

I went out the next day to see him buried. He looked horrible, and I was glad when he was out of sight.

Chapter 2

THE news of Bounce's death and the dramatic way he met it, travelled far and was so enlarged upon that when it came back to us we hardly recognised it. But as time went on and no further horrors appeared in the way of mad things to feed the general thirst for detail, the mad dog scare died out.

For me it was completely overshadowed by the momentous fact that I was to start to school in the fall. I had never attended before; and the accounts that had been brought home by Hen and Margaret filled me with a great eagerness to begin. When I said anything about being in a hurry to get started, Hen had some remark to make about my soon getting enough of school. But I could not believe it.

Father had been in Flatwoods during the summer, and had brought back a big primer for me. The leaves were of cloth instead of paper, and the letters were printed on big red blocks inside. I studied over them by the hour, trying vainly to get some meaning from them, but failing utterly. When I would ask Hen to help me out, he would say that I would learn about it all in school.

Consequently it was a big day for me, when, grasping my big primer firmly in my hands, I started off with Margaret. When we arrived, books had already taken up, and we went in to encounter the stares of all who had got there before us. I sat down with Margaret.

The teacher soon came over and asked Margaret her name. I thought it very strange that any one should ask her such a question, but she answered as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Then he asked me for my name. I hesitated. I did not want to say my own name before all the school. But he pressed me, and at last I told him, very low.

"What did you say?"

"Ben," I repeated, a little louder.

"Ben what?"

"Ben Rhodes."

He wrote it down in a big book, and went back up front.

Outside of that one thing, I never could remember just what happened on that first day, or on many following days, for that matter. It was all a confused jumble of strange experiences.

But the teacher was the strangest of all. As time went on, I got used to the lessons, the other scholars, and especially to the games we played, but I never got used to the teacher. He did not look like anybody I had ever seen. He was tall, his legs were very long and ended finally in a body that was more like a back-log than anything else I knew. His neck was long and red and thin, and his head bobbed around on it as if it were set plumb. And it was this head that struck me as the queerest. Of a certainty I had never seen anything like it. His chin was pointed, his cheek bones stuck out, and his great hook nose seemed designed as a shelter for the long red hairs that grew straight down out of it. Red hair grew not only on his head, although it grew there in great mane-like confusion. It grew all over him. Where his wrists hung down below his coat sleeves it was so profuse that it gave his long arms a gorilla-like suggestiveness. And when he opened his uneven red mouth in a grin, I felt as if I were beholding in reality the laughing hyena that was said to be terrorising the country.

It mattered little to me what others might think of him. In fact, I had more than once heard mother say that she was glad he had our school that year, because, aside from being very smart he was also very striking in appearance. And Minnie McRand told Margaret that he was tall and very handsome.

But I had to piece out an opinion of him from the scanty material that was furnished by my limited experience, and the result certainly was not so very flattering. I compared his hair to the reddish pelt of a certain wild boar that father had shot up in the mountains. His mouth I likened to the terrifying hyena which I had never seen, but which I was able to picture fully from the ample and horrible accounts I had had of him from the other boys, and especially from Hen, for he considered the monster an imminent peril, and took me home of an evening with my hair standing almost straight up from fear that it would pounce upon us from every laurel bush we passed. And I thought the teacher's arms looked very much like the monster gorilla that was honoured with a full page on the chart.

From these diverse sources I built up my conception of him. He came to be a general synthesis of hyena, gorilla and wild boar, with perhaps an added cunning that was given him by his shrewd white lashed eyes. And I think I feared him about as I would have feared the combined presence of all these monsters.

I told father about it, but he laughed and said I would get used to him in time. But I did not. As time went by he appeared even more frightful than he had at first, and I began to dread the day which I was sure would come when I should encounter his wrath.

On a certain afternoon in late Indian summer he stood up in the centre of the room, his legs wide apart and his thumb nails nervously digging into the ends of a pointer he held in front of him. He glowered around at us, and I just sat and shivered with terror. He looked particularly at me, as though to single me out as an offender above all others, and then let his eyes roam over the room.

"Students," he began, "I hear you have been abusing the privilege of playing in the laurel. You must understand that if you disobey my orders you bring the punishment on yourselves. After this no student will be allowed to play in the laurel patch either at noon or at recess."

He sat down, cleared his throat further, and looked out of the window.

His words were a blow to me, for if I loved anything, it was to be the fox out in that great patch of laurel, with the other boys as dogs, and try to elude them and keep them from finding me. The laurel grew so thick that the sun never reached the ground beneath it. It came together overhead like a tangled hedge. The brown bark fell off the twisted stalks and carpeted the ground as with pine needles. And through this tangle there were little circuitous paths worming here and there in the most baffling manner. In the game of fox and dog, I would be given a start while somebody counted fifty, and at the end of that time, amidst much braying and snarling, the whole pack would start in pursuit. It was always my hope to hide so cleverly that books should take up without my hiding place being found.

And now that this one absorbing game was out of the question, what should we do? I knew all too well why we were forbidden to play in the laurel. Floyd Hankerton had smelled too strongly of tobacco the day before to leave any grounds for doubt as to the reason.

I sat with Ed Rainey.

"What will we do now?" I whispered.

"Go anyway."

"He might see us."

"What if he does?"

It mattered to me whether he did. I feared him too much to want to run any risks. But when we went out at noon it certainly was a temptation. The sun was warm, and I knew how delightful it would be under the laurel.

Hen got a sandwich from our lunch and slipped over to where Charlie Snowden was eating. The two talked a moment in an undertone, looking frequently toward the school house door, and then toward the laurel patch.

Then they and several of the older boys started off down the hill.

"Where you going, Hen?" I called.

"O, just down here," he called back carelessly, at the same time beginning to walk faster.

I knew where he was going. The ground would be soft and warm under the laurel. I wished Hen had not gone. He didn't pay much attention to what the teacher said, and I was always afraid he would get whipped terribly. I wanted to go to the laurel patch as badly as he did, but I was too scared of the teacher.

With all my fear of him, I wanted the teacher's approval. I wanted him to say that I had got a good lesson, or written a good copy, or obeyed orders commendably. It made little difference what it was for, I wanted him to say that I was a model pupil. So when I saw all the boys slinking off down toward the laurel patch, I virtuously went out and played ball with the girls until the bell rang. Then I went piously in to my seat and sat down.

When the boys stormed in a little later, scraping their feet on the floor and coughing loudly, I was at my seat industriously engaged with my lessons.

Ed Rainey fell into the seat and knocked my book out of my hand. It fell with a clatter to the floor, but I looked up at the teacher hoping he would see that I was trying hard to obey him in spite of what any one else did, but he was not looking at me.

He sat at his desk looking around the room. The other boys had not got quiet yet, but I was poring over my book with knitted brow. I thought surely he would soon see me and commend me. Perhaps he would do it before the whole school, and hold me up as an example. I hoped he would.

Then he saw me, and for some time looked intently in my direction. I felt his eyes upon me and became much confused. Yet I felt a glow within. Virtue was to receive its reward. Once I looked up at him and smiled understandingly, as if there were some common bond between us which each knew and understood.

He got up and came slowly over toward me. He approached until he stood at my side, looking down at my book. My heart nearly smothered me, for I knew so well what he would say. He had said the same thing about Minnie McRand once, when he told the whole school that they could well copy her example as a student, and although she was the oldest girl in school and Margaret said he was wanting to go with her, I felt that she had not been a bit better than I had been, and just knew that the teacher would say the same thing about me. He would clear his throat loudly, and begin.

"I asked the boys not to play in the laurel to-day, but I see I was not obeyed. Not a student did as I told him, except Ben here," and he would lay his hand familiarly on my shoulder, "and I wish before the whole school to acknowledge——" and I rushed on, mentally picturing the whole scene. I half wished that in addition to commending me, he would hold the others in at recess while I roamed at large.

The minutes flew but nothing happened. I looked up and smiled. He was standing directly at my side. Then he stamped his foot angrily, and brought his pencil down rap! rap! upon my head.

"Keep your eyes on your book, Ben. You must obey what I tell you," and he marched back over toward his desk.

My face got hot. I held the book up in front of me, but it was of little use. I could not see a word. I wanted to hide so no one could see me. Charlie Snowden tittered. I never put in a more interminable afternoon, and when school was out I went home with Margaret.

When we got home father was reading a great book and looked very severe. I didn't say a word to him, for I knew he was getting up his Sunday sermon. I went out to the kitchen instead. Mother was there, romantic and bright as ever.

"There he comes," she called out as I entered, "and how did my boy get along to-day?"

I hesitated only for an instant. Mother always understood everything, and I thought I couldn't keep the thing in my heart another minute. I told her all about it.

"Bless my little boy," she said, and came over and gave me a great hug. That was all she said, but all at once every thing seemed to brighten.

When I went back into the living room Hen was not there. I went out into the front yard and looked around. He was not in sight. I ran around the house and called for him. Just then I saw him up in the woods. He stooped over quickly at sight of me, straightened up and put his knife in his pocket.

"What you want!" he called down impatiently.

"What you doing?" I asked as I hurried up to him. I saw shavings scattered around on the ground. He had been whittling.

"Nothing," he said, starting toward the house.

I could not imagine what he had been doing, yet it was something he wanted to hide from me. I made as if to gather up some round stones such as we used for "skating," intending to wait until he was gone and then try to find what he had been working at.

"What you want?" he called down impatiently.

"Getting some stones to skate."

"No good stones here. Why don't you go down to the sand bar?"

"These are better," and I kept on gathering them.

"Let's go down to the river and see if we can find any fish," he proposed in a wheedling tone.

"Huh-uh. Water's too cold," and I kept on.

"Look then if you want to. I give you leave. You can't find it." He sat down on a rock to wait.

I looked everywhere, but found nothing. Finally I gave up.

"Tell me what it is, Hen," I pleaded.

"Huh-uh. It's not done yet. If you go home now and let me work on it to-night, I'll show it to you to-morrow when we get home from school."

I tried to coax him, but in vain. I gave it up and went home and watched him from the kitchen window. He whittled for a long time. Then he came down to the wood-pile and looked it over. Every now and then he would roll his eyes up and look to see whether I was watching, without appearing to look for me. He selected a small piece of hickory and went back up. That gave me an idea: He was either making a bow or a popgun.

We were nearly home from school the next day before I could induce him to talk about it.

"Did you get it done?" I asked as indifferently as I could.

"Get what done?" But I could see he knew what I meant.

"Huh! Maybe you were not making anything."

"You wait till you see it."

"Maybe I don't want to see it. I've seen them before."

"Seen what?"

"O, what you were making."

"You don't know what it is."

"I don't, don't I? How do you know?"

"Then if you've seen it I won't need to show it to you. You can feed the pigs while I look at it."

Instantly I saw I had gone too far.

"I said maybe," and I smiled feebly.

"No, you didn't."

"Honest, Hen, I haven't touched it."

He seemed mollified and we hurried on. We stopped at the house just long enough to throw our books on a chair, and hurried out and up the hill. Just then father called.

"Boys, come here a minute."

We went back reluctantly.

"Henry, you go to the store and get me a Spencerian pen point. Remember the name, now. S-p-e-n-c-e-r-i-a-n. It will cost a penny. Here it is. Now hurry back. Ben, you take that basket and go up and pull a basket of parsley for the hogs. Get it clear full. Now hurry, both of you."

I got the basket and trudged wearily up the field. Looking back over my shoulder I saw Hen dart off for the store like a whirlwind. To go there was a great thing. The smell was fine, and pieces of poplar boards might be picked up anywhere and used for making paddles and dead-falls. But to pull parsley for the hogs! That was the most despised job of all. While I was filling the basket with the fat reddish stuff I was in a nervous fear lest Hen should get back before me and take what he had made and leave again. I pulled furiously, and in much less time than seemed to me, was back again. Father saw me coming and smiled approvingly.

"You did well, Bennie. Now you can carry in some stove wood. Henry is not back yet."

While I was carrying in the first load Hen came back. He gave the pen to mother and hurried up the hill. I threw down the load in the wood box and hurried after him. Father's voice called me back.

"Bring in another load, son. That one is not enough."

I could have cried. While I was carrying in wood Hen was up there doing goodness knew what! When I joined him he was sitting calmly on a rock. It was the one he had sat on the day before while I had searched. He saw that I was panting and grinned.

"Why didn't you slip out?" he inquired in a cunning tone.

"I did, but he made me come back."

"Why didn't you tell mother? She would have carried in the wood."

"Where is it?" I demanded.

"Here."

"Where?"

"Under this rock."

He got up and calmly rolled the stone away. Underneath he had burrowed out the earth, and in the hollow was the treasure. It was a pop-gun, and before I had admired it, I admired Hen. He had had the forethought to introduce a new fashion. No use to forbid us to play in the laurel again that year. When that pop-gun appeared in school the next day, every boy would spend the noon along the creek banks looking for elders to make pop-guns out of.

And this pop-gun was a beauty. Somewhere Hen had found the biggest piece of elder I had ever seen. This he had carefully peeled and scraped and rounded until it glistened. After he had shoved the pith out, he had hollowed the breech out slightly to facilitate loading. He had carefully whittled a ram rod out of the stick of hickory stove wood, and had left a big square head on the end of it to hit with the hand.

"What you think of it?" he asked.

It was some little time before I answered. I just stood and looked with my mouth open.

"Let me feel it," I asked, stretching out my hand eagerly.

He drew back.

"No. You might break it. I'll show it to you."

Then he began didactically.

"See this ramrod? Notice I left a square head on it so you can hit it harder and it won't hurt your hand. Most of them are round. Now notice it here at the breech. See how it is hollowed out. That's so you can load it quicker. See?"

Did I notice it? Did I! Again my admiration for Hen grew above my admiration of the gun. He had made an invention. No one ever made a pop-gun at Barren Rocks after that that did not have the breech hollowed out after the fashion of Hen's new invention. Hen was smart. At that moment I thought he was wonderful. But he soon got overbearing about it.

"You couldn't make a pop-gun like that. No one around here could."

I knew it, but there was no use for Hen to say so.

"Maybe it won't shoot," I insinuated.

"Won't shoot? Won't shoot? You just watch and see. Watch me shoot that—that—" he looked around him, "that pig up there."

He pulled a piece of newspaper out of his pocket, crammed it into his mouth and began to chew on it feverishly. When he had reduced it to a pulp he pulled out a piece and forced it through the gun until it stuck out at the front end. He put his thumb over it and pushed it back tight. Then he shoved another wad in at the breech and pushed it about half way down.

He grasped the gun firmly in his left hand and looked around. Off a little piece was a sand coloured pig nosing around for mast. It grunted inquiringly as we turned toward it, blinked at us and twitched its little spiral tail. Hen took aim. He drew back his right arm, palm open and rigid, and brought his hand around sharply against the ramrod. There was a sharp pop! and the little ball of wet paper shot straight for the hog. It took it square on the ham. The hog grunted sharply, kicked its leg and walked disgustedly away.

"Won't shoot, won't it?" smiled Hen superiorly.

"What you going to do with it?"

"Take it to school to-morrow," and he made for the house.

On our way to school the next morning I noticed a large bulge in Hen's hip pocket. It filled me with forebodings. He would be sure to get in trouble with the pop-gun, and again my old terror of what the teacher might do to him arose to make me wretched. I wished Hen would be more careful.

"What you going to do with it in school?" I asked him.

"Wait and see," was the sinister reply.

Books had taken up at noon and there had been no trouble so far. I began to have hopes that for once Hen would act sensible and not try to do anything that the teacher did not want him to do. I felt greatly relieved. But almost as the sigh of relief escaped me I looked at Hen and was filled with consternation.

Hen didn't have a regular seat mate. He was one of the older pupils, as the teacher called them, and they sat about where they pleased. Sometimes Hen would sit alone for a week or two, then he would sit with Charley Snowden or Grouchie McRand, and he had even been known to sit with Floyd Hankerton, although very few would sit with him. Nearly every one avoided Floyd. His clothes were always horrible. He would eat his dinner, get apple-butter on his hands, and wipe them on his clothes by the simple but practical method of placing them open on his sides and rubbing them down over his shirt and pants as far as he could reach. His hands were usually in fair condition and left little to be desired, but his clothes made him a rather sticky seat mate. But Hen sat with him once. That was like Hen. Take it into his head to do a thing, and he would do it.

But this day he sat with Bill Hunter. As I looked over at him I saw the two with their heads down looking intently at something on Hen's knee. Hen was chewing a piece of paper cautiously, working his fingers over his face so the teacher couldn't see what he was doing. I couldn't see the actual act from where I sat, but I knew well enough when he shoved the first wad of paper into the pop-gun. I saw him look all around and commence a second operation, and from the absorbed look on Bill's face I knew the matter had proceeded to a very acute and interesting stage.

I was filled with panic. Why, I kept asking myself, did Hen always manage to do something which he knew the teacher wouldn't like? Couldn't he see he was sure to be found out and wasn't he afraid of the teacher? I could not see for the life of me how any one would dare to cross him, but evidently Hen was not at all nervous. There he sat loading his pop-gun, and his very absorption gave the teacher a chance to slip up behind him and catch him red-handed. Once the teacher moved in the back of the room, and I wanted to shout a warning.

But I looked on as if fascinated. Hen looked slowly and cautiously around the room. Bill grinned, cleared his throat, straightened up and began to study in the most industrious manner. He was working on his reading lesson, and from where I sat I could hear him pronounce the words as he read them:

> But his little daughter whispered
> As she took his icy hand,
> "Isn't God upon the ocean,
> Just the same as on the land?"

Just then Hen straightened up in his seat. Three seats in front of him sat Henrietta McRand. Henrietta was fat, and a lot of her neck was exposed as she bent dutifully over her lesson. I divined Hen's intention even before he made a move. I could have cried aloud. The teacher was standing in the open doorway looking down the road. I knew Hen didn't like Henrietta. The girls called her Hen and we called Henry Hen, and Henry and Henrietta were called the Barren Rocks leghorns. This made Hen very mad. He raised his left hand and in it was the awful pop-gun. He aimed it squarely at Henrietta's bare neck. He drove the ramrod hard, and the paper ball struck her square.

The report of the gun and Henrietta's scream came so near together that I did not know which caused the teacher to turn. She looked around, more frightened, I believe, at her own scream than because of what had hit her, and the whole school broke into a babble.

"Silence!" the teacher thundered, glaring around. "What is this I hear?"

I looked nervously over at Hen. He and Bill were the only studious ones in the room. They were even clever enough to simulate interest in the uproar around them before they began to look suspicious. Margaret said afterward that my eyes were fairly popping out of my head and that I was bouncing around on my seat. The teacher fixed a cold eye on me.

"Ben, do you know anything about this?" he demanded.

I managed to stammer out that I did not. Ed Rainey tittered.

"Be quiet, Ed," the teacher said, and, "Return to your studies, students, and let me hear nothing more out of you this day."

For some time I did not look in Hen's direction. When I did he and Bill were still hard at work. I had not watched them long before I noticed that the tension was relaxing. I knew Hen so well that I could tell every move he made. When he looked at Bill and winked, I knew that their success had been so complete that they would try something more. When Bill winked and nodded encouragingly, I knew some further devilment was being contemplated.

Once more Hen got out his pop-gun and loaded it. This time he seemed to have no particular mark in view. He simply let the ramrod rest on his knee while he looked about him innocently—at the walls, at the teacher, out of the window. How it happened he never could explain. Perhaps in looking around he forgot the gun in his hands, and let the weight of his arm rest too heavily upon it. At any rate it went off, not a sharp, clear report, but a sickly feeble pop, and the paper wad went up straight, hit the ceiling and stuck.

He had the presence of mind to put the gun in his pocket, but the teacher was keen to note the direction of the sound. Perhaps he had seen more than we knew. It sometimes happened that way. At least he strode directly to Hen's seat. He spoke first to Bill.

"Bill, did you shoot off that pop-gun?"

"No, sir," Bill answered promptly.

"Do you know who did?"

Bill did not answer. The teacher stood for a moment, then looked up at the ceiling where the wad stuck. It was directly over Hen's head. He went around to Hen.

"Give me that pop-gun," he demanded shortly.

Reluctantly, sheepishly, Hen handed it over. He took it up and laid it on his desk.

"Now, Henry, you can go up and stand behind the chart. I am going to dismiss school early to-day, but you can stay until four o'clock."

Shortly afterward, school was dismissed, and we filed out more serious than usual. I looked back over my shoulder as I went out the door. Hen was behind the chart. But instead of standing meekly behind it, he was tiptoeing up until his head stuck up above it, and when any one looked back at him he would draw down his mouth and stick out his tongue in a horrible grin. I shuddered.

Chapter 3

CHRISTMAS was over a month off, but my desire was so overpowering that I wanted to take all precautions. Ed Rainey had wanted a pair of boots the Christmas before, but when he asked his mother a few days before Christmas whether he would be apt to get them or not, she said she didn't expect he would, as he had not asked for them soon enough. She said Santy had his presents already made up, and that Ed had waited too long.

I simply would not run the risk of being too late in asking for what I wanted. It was too important. Mother was in the kitchen washing the supper dishes and I went quietly in to talk the whole thing over with her. Father was in the living room, but I felt easier in going first to mother. To be sure father never was very cross, and was always careful to be just with us, but it was a lot easier to come to an understanding with mother, although he usually had the final authority.

I sat down by the kitchen table. It was covered with oil cloth made up like a big checker board. I didn't know just how to begin what I had to say. My heart was beating pretty fast, and I wanted to wait until it stopped so that it wouldn't click in my throat as it sometimes did when I was very excited. I let on that one square in the table cloth was a trap, and that my hand was a bear. I walked the bear up a row of squares until he stepped unwittingly in the trap and was caught safe, and by that time I felt better.

"Have you heard anything from Santy yet, mother?" I began.

"Not yet, sonnie. Is my boy thinking about Santy?"

"I was just wondering."

"And what is my boy wondering about?"

"Santy brought Grouchie McRand a gun last year."

She became very serious.

"But my boy must not expect too much of Santy."

"But I am not too young to carry a gun. I shoot Grouchie's, and I killed a squirrel with it, too," I burst out passionately.

"I know, sonnie, but sometimes poor people don't get very much from Santy."

"But why should Santy care whether we are poor or not? I could keep the ground squirrels out of the corn, too, if I had a gun," I added, cunningly.

"I know, sonnie. But sometimes the churches get behind and——"

"But what difference does that make with Santy? He don't have to buy the presents. They just come."

"Maybe you had better ask your father about it," she suggested.

"You ask him for me! Maybe he will say I can have one if you ask him." Father was always fair to us, but I dreaded to ask him for anything. When mother asked him for me I usually ran and held my ears until she was through.

"We will see about it," was all she would say.

A week or so later I went into the living room. She was sitting before the fire. She looked at me a long time without saying a word. I was leaning against the jamb looking into the fire, but I knew she was looking at me. Then I looked at her.

"Why, mother, you are crying," I said, going over toward her. She laughed in her low petting way.

"No, I'm not, sonnie."

"You are, too. I see tears in your eyes."

"It is the fire. It hurts my eyes."

"It don't hurt mine," I persisted stubbornly.

"That is because you are a little man. Come and sit on my lap."

I went over and she pulled me back against her.

"We have heard from Santy," she began.

I didn't move. I didn't even breathe.

"He—he said maybe we couldn't have a gun this year."

I looked up into her eyes a long time. She looked into mine. Then I got up and went into the kitchen.

For several days I did not know what to make of it. Then I went to mother again.

"Will Santy bring us anything, mother?"

She patted my head.

"Santy never forgets good boys. You wait and see."

For a whole week before Christmas everything was abustle at our house. Great quantities of round brown sweet cakes were baked and stored away. Big fat layer cakes were put together and the top sprinkled with red cinnamon drops. Pies of all sorts were baked, and mother made little rabbits and Indians and baskets out of the pie crust. She made me a great steel trap out of some, and put a fox in it.

Christmas came on Friday, and father and mother went to town on Wednesday. They rode back after night, mother in her long black riding-skirt and father in his big high leggings. It was bitter cold outside, and we had a roaring log fire in the fireplace when they came in. Hen went out to put the horses in the stable, but he made us promise we wouldn't open a thing until he got back. Hen told me he did not care how long it was until Christmas, but he kept the frost thawed off the window while he watched for father and mother that night.

When they got their wraps off, father got me under the arms and held me clear up to the ceiling. Mother was all pink and glowy, and her eyes shone like stars. There were any number of packages, all tied up in red and brown paper. Father got these all together and started into the kitchen. I made after him.

"No, you go back, son. I must put these things in where they won't thaw out."

He went into a little room that opened off the kitchen, that we used to store things in. When he came back in he looked greatly pleased.

"You children must not go into the back room any more," he said.

Then he picked up the saddle-pockets and began to unbuckle the flaps. But loyal Margaret spoke up.

"Hen is not back yet. We promised not to open anything until he got back."

We all waited until he came in.

"Hurry up, Hen. We are waiting for you," I cried eagerly.

"No hurry," he drawled. "What you bouncing around for, Ben?"

"You let my little boy alone," mother said, and drew me over to her.

Then father opened the saddle-pockets. First he drew out a package and untied it carefully. It was filled with long, striped sticks of peppermint candy. He carefully gave us each a stick.

"O Tommy, give them the bananas. Let's see what they think of them," mother broke in eagerly. Father's real name was Peter, but mother always called him Tommy when there was no company around.

"Bananas?" we all echoed blankly. None of us had ever heard of them before, and had no idea what they were. We were so far from the railroad that things had to be brought to the Barren Rocks store in canoes, and the storekeeper did not keep anything but the "staples."

"The banana, children, is a fruit that grows on trees," father explained. "They grow something like paw-paws, only in bunches. Here they are. You peel them like this and then eat them." He gave Hen and Margaret each one, but he broke me off a piece of the third, and ate the rest himself.

I took a little bite and chewed on it a long time. It was sticky, and had a sweetish flavour unlike anything I had ever tasted before. Hen and Margaret finished theirs, but one bite was as far as I got. I took it over and gave the rest to mother.

"Don't you like it?"

I shook my head.

"I will lay it up for you and you can eat it to-morrow," and she put it up on the fireboard. But I never finished it.

I thought Christmas never would come. I sat by the fire the day before and counted off the hours as they were ticked off by the big clock that stood on a shelf against the wall. And when I finally went to bed I could hardly go to sleep at all. We had been told to shut the bedroom door tight so as not to frighten Santy away.

It was not long before we heard movements in the living room, and I asked Hen in a whisper if it could possibly be Santy. For answer he got up, tiptoed to the door and cautiously opened it about an inch. He sat there with his eyes glued to it for a long time. Finally he came slowly back to bed.

"Go to sleep, Ben," he said as he covered up.

I wanted to go to sleep so morning would hurry and come, but for some reason I could not at all . . . I lay a long time . . . I began to count imaginary sheep as they jumped over the fence. Mother had said that was a good way to get to sleep . . . one, two, three, four . . . seven, eight, nine . . . I thought I was in the field watching a great line of sheep that kept coming on and on . . . twenty, twenty-one . . . there was a big one. . . .

"Wake up, Ben! Wake up! Christmas gift!"

I sat up with a start to behold father in the doorway, his face looking red and distorted in the light of the great log fire. I cleared the bed at a bound, and made for my box. Hen was before me, so was Margaret.

"Run to your box, Ben, and see what Santy brought you," cried father.

He was standing in the middle of the floor, his red flannel nightshirt reaching about to his knees, his feet bare, with a great smile on his face.

"What did he bring you, Ben? Come over and show me!" he cried.

I was excited to death. I carried my box over to him, and we went through it together. He picked up each thing at a time, speaking eagerly, hurriedly.

"See! The pop corn. Nice big bunches. And sugar on it. And the parched corn. My! my! parched corn, nice and salty. Um-um-um. Will you ever eat it up? And look at these fire-crackers! Real fire-crackers. And what's this? A candy cane! Think, a candy cane. Won't it be good! Um-um. And, O Ben, what's this? Look. What's this? Look here. A knife. See the big blade? And a little blade! A real knife, and it's yours." He held me up and looked at me searchingly.

I wriggled down, so excited I could hardly breathe. I gathered my treasures together and made for the kitchen. Mother was busy with the breakfast. When she saw me, she put down everything and came toward me.

"Bless my little man! What did Santy bring my boy?"

I held out my box and she looked at it delightedly.

"What nice things! Isn't Christmas fine? And here is another Christmas gift for my boy." So saying she knelt down on the floor and held out her arms. I climbed right into her lap. She turned my face up. "Here's one, and here, and here!" she said, kissing me each time. "Now give mother a Christmas gift." I wound my arms around her and gave her a mighty hug. "Now run back to the fire," she said, and I was off.

All that morning we spent in the house, snug by the fire, eating our candy and pop corn, lighting fire-crackers in the fireplace and running to throw them out doors. How they cracked, and what delicious fun we did have.

Almost before we knew it, mother called us in to dinner. The kitchen floor was bare, and our boots and shoes clattered on the floor in a great noise. Father had made the table himself, and this day mother had put her big snowy cover on it. It was the only linen table cloth she had, and she thought the world of it. Some one had given it to her at the River appointment. As we trooped into the kitchen she stood proudly at the end of the table. Hen and I made a great rush for our places. We had hardly got settled when mother gave us a warning look. Father was going to return thanks. We thought it took him a long time to get through, but at last he finished, and we began our dinner. We had chicken and rabbit and squirrel. There were boiled potatoes, and sweet potatoes, and plenty of squirrel gravy to go over them.

"Quit bouncing up and down, Ben," Hen admonished. "Your turn will come."

"I'll fix sonnie's plate," mother said, and began to put things on it. When it would hold no more she set it down in front of me. I at once began. "Wait, now, sonnie, till we get ready," she said.

She fluttered around, helping first one and then another. Her cheeks had little red spots on them, and her eyes were soft. She looked proud also, and I was proud of her.

"Be careful of the table-cloth, Tommy," she cautioned.

It didn't take us nearly so long to finish after we once got started as it had taken us to get ready. In what seemed to be but a minute or two I was beginning to look about helplessly. There were stacks of pies and cakes left, but I had lost interest. I ate slowly, indifferently, and was glad, when Hen got up, to slip out with him.

Soon Margaret, Hen and I went out to play. We went off down the river bottom, and it was not long until Essie Evans came out and joined us. Essie had big dark eyes and curly hair. She wore her hair in little spirals that hung down around her shoulders.

I liked Essie better than anybody else. She was so clean and dainty that I always liked being around where she was. Margaret said one day that it would be a nice thing if Essie and I could be married some day. I thought it would too.

When she came up to where we were playing, I showed her a square piece of candy Santy had brought me. It was made in three layers, the outside ones green, and the middle one white. I thought it was very fine and let Essie hold it. She wanted a bite of it, but I gave her a bite off my cane instead.

We ran races up and down the bottom for a while, then climbed up a little tree and jumped out, but it was too cold to have much fun out where the wind blew so hard. Hen suggested that we build us houses out of a big pile of cord wood, and play that we were grown up and lived in a city.

We went to work immediately. By laying the ends of the wood together in a square we could build easily, and the wind did not blow nearly so hard inside. When we were down to the last layer of wood, Hen picked up a stick and a great grey rat jumped out from under it, and with tail sticking straight out, scampered nimbly out across the field. We all took after it. It could run much faster than we could, but Hen happened to hit it with a stone and stunned it. When we got up to it it was helpless, and he held it up by the tail and hit it over the head with a stick. Still holding it firmly by the tail he started back toward our play houses.

"What you going to do with it, Hen?" asked Essie.

"Don't know yet."

"I'll tell you what," said Margaret excitedly, "let's cook it and play we have company for dinner."

"And get chips for plates and have candy too," suggested Essie.

"Where would we cook it?" asked Hen practically.

"Why, build a fire in one of our play houses," said Margaret.

"I'll tell you a better thing than that," Hen suggested seriously. "Why not marry Ben and Essie and cook the rat for a wedding feast?"

The suggestion was just like Hen—original, bold. Besides, I liked the idea immensely. I wanted to marry Essie. But Margaret was so taken aback by the daring nature of the plan that it was some little time before she could reply. Then she agreed enthusiastically, and she and Hen went about making all things ready.

Hen went off to our house, and returned in a little bit with two bundles. He laid these down and went over to Margaret.

"Here is a match. You build a fire and cook the rat. I'll marry them over by that stump, and then we will all come back over for the feast."

He came over and picked up one of the bundles. It was mother's long black riding skirt.

"Essie, you put this on for your wedding dress, and get in the house here. Ben will go in and get you and bring you over to the stump where I will marry you."

When she started in Hen picked up the other bundle. It was one of father's long Prince Albert coats. He put it on and it reached nearly to the ground. From the pocket of it he got a book entitled, "Pastor's Ideal Vest Pocket Ritual."

"What's in the book?" I asked gleefully.

"That's what you get married out of. I will go over to the stump. You go in and get Essie and come over."

When I got to the play house I found Margaret and Essie struggling with the riding skirt. It was way too long, but Margaret had solved the difficulty by offering herself as train-bearer.

"I'll walk along behind and hold it up for you," she explained.

"Come on, Essie. Hen's ready." I offered her my arm and felt very proud and important.

She laid her hand on my arm and we marched out. Margaret walked solemnly behind holding up the skirt. Hen was standing gravely up on the stump, his right hand shoved part way into the breast of the Prince Albert, and the Ritual in his left hand—Father's characteristic attitude. As we approached he called out in father's best voice,

"Who comes here?"

This unexpected question took us so by surprise that we halted abruptly. I didn't know just what Hen expected us to say. But I suddenly remembered a story father had told us about the war. When a sentry saw any one coming toward him he called out, Who comes there? and the person would answer, A friend. So when Hen sternly repeated his question, I said,

"A friend."

"It is well," he said. "Approach ye."

We stopped directly in front of him, and he opened to the marriage service, knitted his brow and began.

"Dearly beloved brethren, we have gathered together in the sight of God and of this company," and he looked impressively about him. But just then the wind blew the pages over and he lost the place. He began to look for it hastily, but it seemed he couldn't find it. He got red. I could see his anger mount. Hen hated to appear at a disadvantage. He looked up aggressively.

"Any way," he finished, "I pronounce you man and wife forever. Now hurry and get that thing off Essie, and we will go and eat the rat."

Margaret had cooked the rat on the fire. It was smoked quite a bit, but she had divided it neatly into four pieces, and we each had one served on a chip. I had a hind leg and picked it up gingerly. Margaret had the other hind leg, but she did not pick it up. She sat looking at us with an "I won't believe it until I see it" expression on her face. She had cleaned the rat. I bit off a bite and relished it. It was good. Aside from the taste of wood smoke, it tasted about like rabbit. It was Essie that started it.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed, and threw her piece as far as she could send it. "I wouldn't eat a RAT!" and she shuddered.

"Neither would I," Margaret said calmly.

"Did you eat any of it, Ben?" Essie demanded.

I had sheepishly hid my piece.

"Huh! Do you think I would eat a rat?" I said indignantly.

"Listen," Margaret said suddenly. "There's mother calling for us. We will have to go home now. Come on, Ben."

Off we went. When we neared the house Margaret saw mother.

"What do you want with us?" she asked.

"We want you in the house."

"What for?"

"Come on, now," mother said in a low voice.

"Oh!" Margaret said understandingly, and we went in.

Father sat before the fire looking grave. We all sat down and were very still. Mother's hands were folded in her lap. Father turned to me.

"Ben, do you know whose birthday this is?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied promptly. "Grouchie McRand was born on Christmas morning. He has a little pup, too. Old McRand just got it for him yesterday."

"Never say Old McRand, Ben. Say Mr. McRand. But I didn't mean somebody around here. Who was born on Christmas day away back yonder?"

Then I knew what he meant, and in a low whisper told him.

"That is right. Now before we go out I want to read something."

He produced a worn Bible, turned through it reverently, found the place for which he was looking, and read.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the Glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, fear not: for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And it shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

After he had finished reading we all sat for some time in silence. Finally I heard Hen whispering to mother.

"Ask him, mother," he wheedled.

"Wait awhile."

He waited a minute or two. Then he began again.

"Ask him."

"Tommy, Henry wants to know if you will go rabbit hunting this afternoon," she finally said.

"O-ho," he said jubilantly. "O-ho. So that's what you are after, is it?"

He got up and went to the fireplace. Up over it, resting on two wooden pegs that had been driven into auger holes in the wall, was the long squirrel rifle. It was a big heavy gun. The stock was made of curly maple, and shone a deep dark red. The shoulder-piece had long metal tips at top and bottom, and there was a little cup with a tiny lid, in the side of the stock for tallow. The bore was so large I could run my finger down the muzzle, and I could see the deep rifles twisting down the barrel. The outside of the barrel was octagon, the sight was narrow and fine, while the bead was made of silver. Father took the gun down and looked it over carefully.

"Maybe, we had just as well go out for a little while. We might get a rabbit or two. Who knows?"

He took down the shot pouch also. The great crooked horn that held the powder was scraped so thin that the powder could be seen through it. It was a little over half full. He lifted the flap of the thick cowhide shot pouch and ran his hand inside, pulling out caps, tow and cloth. There were also a few bullets. He counted them.

"Only six, Henry. You get the lead and mould some more while I clean out the gun."

Hen lost no time in obeying. He got the heavy iron bullet moulds that worked like a pair of pincers and were hollowed out into a mould the size of the gun bore. He found the ladle, put about half a bar of lead in it, and put it on the kitchen stove. Soon the lead began to flatten out, and under the dull brown coating on top it appeared a shimmering white. Hen then began to pour the lead into the moulds, opening them and knocking out each bullet, while I stood at one side clipping off the necks. We made nine and went back into the living room.

Father was still cleaning out the gun. He had wrapped some tow on the long wooden ramrod, and was slowly wiping it out. When he had finished, he slung the shot pouch over his shoulder, and we were ready to start.

As we went out of the door, we found Ponto on hand, ready and eager to go along. A member of the Oakum Mills Church had given him to father not long after old Bounce went mad, and we thought a lot of him. He looked a lot like Bounce, and was a fine dog. Of course I did not think quite as much of him as I had of Bounce. I was sure no other dog could ever take his place. And yet—well, Ponto was all right!

He jumped up when he saw us coming, and when he saw the gun also, he became even more excited. He whined eagerly and jumped up to lick our hands. Then yelping with great delight he ran off toward the woods.

But father called him back.

"You go back, Ponto. We don't want you to-day."

At the sound of father's voice his tail dropped. But he looked up as if he certainly had been mistaken—as if it could not be true.

"Go back, sir. Go back. Not to-day."

His whole body drooped. His tail fell pathetically, and he trotted off toward the house. He sat down at the corner and looked after us. I glanced back to see what he was doing, and he evidently thought there was still hope, for he laid back his ears and wagged his tail. But I shook my head and he dropped back down again.

We went up the hill back of the house, crossed the old brush fence that surrounded our corn field, and struck directly into the woods. It was a cold day, but to me the woods always seemed warm and friendly. The timber had never been cleared off the land, and the great trees flung high their mighty trunks. The little saplings beneath them grew trim and clean.

We came to a deep cavity in the mountain-side where in years long gone by some primitive dweller in the land had digged for ore. Little indicated that it was there now, save the mound of earth at one side. The cavity itself was filled with leaves. In a spirit of deviltry I jumped from the mound at the side over into the hole. I lit in the soft leaves, and sunk far in.

Then beneath me there was a great upheaval. The leaves began to move as though some sleeping monster beneath had been aroused by my ill-timed action and were getting up preparatory to summary revenge. I was terrified, and began frantically to climb out of the pit. I called loudly to Hen who stood off a little ways, mouth agape, looking on in amazement. To my great surprise father began to laugh, and as my struggles increased, so did his laughter. He fairly roared, and then began to shout facetious directions.

"Jump a little higher, Ben. Grab a root. That's it. Now heave."

I finally succeeded in getting out, and then turned to see what strange monster I had aroused. There was still a great shuffling of the leaves. Soon a small slim razor-back darted out of the leaves and ran nimbly down the hill, followed by another and yet another. I was deeply chagrined.

"Scared them out of their nest, Ben," father said.

"I didn't know they slept in places like that," I answered him.

"Sure they do. You will find them in lots of places just like that. And it's not bad, either. Wouldn't mind to try it myself, sometime."

I thought the same thing. Undoubtedly it would be cosy to burrow down into the dry leaves, out of reach of the wind, and snuggle down to sleep.

Then father told us something about the doings of that primitive people who, long ago, had lived around Barren Rocks. From the many arrow-heads found scattered over the country it was pretty clear that they were Indians. And yet the hieroglyphs found carved on the cliffs about, made it clear also that they had advanced farther in the use of the alphabet, at least, than is usually thought. For these hieroglyphs were evidently of the phonetic and not the ideographic kind. They stood for sounds, and not for isolated objects. Further than this, the many ore pits on the mountains testified to a crude form of mining ores.

From these facts father built up his conception of those primitive peoples. Not warriors, but hunters, mainly; not altogether savage, but possessed of a rude form of civilisation, more like a decadent grandeur than an embryonic culture. And they were strong men and daring. None but the strong could have left the marks they had left; none but the daring would have hung out over the cliff's edge to chisel a message to those that would follow.

And listening to him my imagination was fired by pictures of that long past day. I peopled the hills with sturdy hunters; saw the white smoke of a hundred camp fires; and heard the shouts of ancient revels.

But Hen was not so interested. He had heard it all before. I had too, for that matter, for father had a way of telling a thing over and over again. But I never failed to be interested in the stories of those whose home ours had been in earlier day.

Hen, however, was not greatly impressed. While father talked to me, he had gone on in front, looking on all sides for some signs of game. Soon he stopped. He looked back at us, and motioned mysteriously. With great care, we made our way up to him. He pointed to the foot of a gum tree that stood not many yards away. We saw a big rabbit sitting there, humped up into a compact ball. It looked very funny and stupid, with its big pink ears sticking up. Father put the rifle to his shoulder and took careful aim. Simultaneously with the report of the gun, the rabbit jumped high into the air and fell back limply to the ground. Greatly excited, I ran and picked him up.

We had travelled in a circle, and were on our way back home. In front of us a grey squirrel hurried up a big chestnut oak. He climbed clear to the top, where he stopped, hugging the limb closely. The wind flirted with his tail, doubtless to his great dislike. It was a long shot, and difficult, but father walked off a little distance and took aim. I looked steadily at the squirrel. When the gun went off, I saw him bulge out from the limb, hang for an instant by one of his front toes, and then fall to the ground.

Father came down laughing.

"Well, now, that was a pretty good shot," he said. Then after a moment's examination, "Suppose we go home now, boys. We have had our little hunt, and by the time we get there it will be time to do up the work."

As we were nearing home, I crossed over a dead log and noticed tracks in the soft earth at one side.

"Father, here is a 'possum's track," I called.

He came over and examined the track closely.

"How do you know it is a 'possum's track?"

"Because it is heavy at the heel."

He grinned.

"Sure enough. That's just what it is. Henry, call Ponto. He may be able to track it to its hole if the scent isn't too old."

"Not much danger," Hen said, but he called Ponto nevertheless.

Hen did not think much of Ponto. He claimed that he was no good, and lost no opportunity of declaring his conviction. Father, on the other hand, stoutly stood up for the dog, and he now waited for him with an air of conviction.

Soon he came bounding through the bushes in a very delirium of excitement.

"Here he is," Hen said contemptuously.

"Here, Ponto," father called, and pointed to the tracks.

He sniffed nervously around for a moment, whined eagerly, and stopped.

Hen snorted.

"I knew it."

"Hunt him up, Ponto," father urged.

Again he sniffed at the tracks, and this time, after circling around a time or two, started off at a businesslike trot.

"I knew it," father cried in great glee; and we made after him.

Up the hill, across a hollow, over some rocks—and then we lost sight of him. But pretty soon we heard him bark, and went in the direction of the sound on the run. He was at the side of a big flat rock when we found him, biting at some frozen roots and vainly trying to dig his way in.

"What did I tell you?" and father was jubilant. "That's it, Ponto. Dig him out."

Ponto redoubled his efforts and threw the dirt in a veritable hail behind him. Occasionally he stopped, crowded his head into the hole and snuffed forcibly.

Father cut a long stick, left a heavy fork on the small end, and punched into the hole. For several minutes he punched carefully, and then he began to twist.

"Boys, I've got him," he cried.

He twisted more, and still more, and then began to pull toward him slowly. From within the hole came a dull noise, as of something making a desperate effort to resist being pulled out.

"Get ready, Ponto," father urged.

But Ponto needed no urging. He heard the noise, and as it drew nearer, he tried to wedge himself into the hole. He stood there, tongue out, eyes snapping, waiting.

And when at last the big white 'possum was pulled out, it gave up all resistance, and lay as if dead. Ponto had his reward, and did the rest.

Proudly carrying the rabbit, the squirrel and the 'possum, I went ahead of the others home. I went in and showed mother what we had got, and she was delighted.

Hen and I did up the work, while father dressed the game. When we got through it was dark. I was terribly hungry, and so was Hen. When we went into the living room to warm, he did not stop long, but slipped out to the kitchen. Before long he returned, a bewildered expression on his face. Mother sat before the fire rocking, and he looked at her quizzically.

I sat for a few minutes longer, and then I went out to the kitchen. It was cold and dark. There was no fire in the stove, and not the slightest sign of supper. I felt over to the safe, but it was closed. I was greatly discouraged. Going back into the living room, I encountered Hen's troubled gaze, understood, and returned it. Margaret also was sitting by the fire, seemingly without a thought. Hen came over to me.

"Did you see anything?"

"Not a bite."

"Maybe we won't have any."

My heart sank.

"Why not?"

"Well, where is it?" he demanded, and I had no answer.

Father came in then, and looked at Hen and me with a smile.

"Well, boys, after our big dinner, we have decided not to have any supper. We must let mother rest, you know."

Hen looked as Lucifer must have looked when he heard that a greater had been set above him. Clearly the idea was not to his liking.

"I am sorry, boys. But you see how it is," father continued.

I did not say anything, but went over to mother. The last word had to come from her before I gave up. She looked at me—and laughed.

"Now, Tommy, you go and get that basket," she directed.

Father went out into the little room off the kitchen and soon came back with a big basket. It was filled with potatoes, eggs, apples and chestnuts. He was clearly having the time of his life.

"Now, boys, here is where we have some fun. As soon as the fire dies down a little more, we will roast these potatoes and eggs and chestnuts in the ashes. Mother will bake a pone in the oven there, too, and we will have a big time."

My, my, what fun it was. That was just like mother. It was ever so much more fun than just eating at the table. She made a place in the ashes for the big earthenware oven, filled it with the corn dough, put on the lid and covered it over with the red coals. While it was baking, we put the potatoes and chestnuts in the ashes, and also the eggs, first pouring water over them so they would not burst.

They were all done about the same time, the potatoes taking a little longer than the rest. When mother opened the old oven, the hot brown pone filled the room with a delicious odour. We dragged the eggs out and peeled them, turning them over and over to keep from being burned. Then came the potatoes, and the feast was complete.

My, how good it was. And when we had eaten the pone and the eggs and the potatoes, we raked out the big hot chestnuts and ate them too. Last of all came the apples, which father had got out of the big hole in the garden the day before. They were mellow and cold, and we ate until we couldn't hold any more.

After we were through, I took off my boots and sat down on the floor near the fireplace. Father began to tell us one of those wonderful stories he had doubtless got from his own mother, for she was a wonderful storyteller.

It was about the Lost Boy. The little fellow had gone off into the woods in search of flowers, and had failed to return.

"After an hour or two his mother missed him, and went out into the yard and called. He did not answer. She went out to the stable and looked for him, but he was not there. Then she became frightened. There had been stories of tramps passing through the country, and she shuddered to think what might have happened. Her husband was away, and would not be home until evening. . . ."

I tried hard to rouse myself to listen, but it was cosy and warm down where I sat. . . . I closed my eyes. . . . "And at last he came home. She told him that Jimmy was lost; that he had been gone for hours. He looked everywhere, and at last blew the conch shell for the neighbours . . . the search party scattered in all directions . . . two shots from a gun meant he was found. . . ." I heard the words as if they came from far away. Father's voice sounded unreal . . . maybe it was not father at all . . . "and she stood in the door to listen for the shots. . . . Would she never hear? . . . Then from far over the mountain, one shot . . . she waited . . . one shot meant trouble . . . would the other never be fired . . . then another. . . .

Chapter 4

THE teacher was standing in the centre of the room, leering about at us. His great uneven red mouth was spread in what he doubtless intended for a jovial smile.

"The school is about over for the year, students," he began, clearing his throat with such vehemence that I looked to see the top of his head fly right off. "We have had, on the whole, a very successful year. With but few exceptions, the scholars have advanced as well as I had expected. We now want to begin to prepare for the last day of school. Talk it over with your parents to-night, and if any student can find a good selection to recite, bring it around to-morrow. We want to make the last day a fitting close for the year."

The last day of school! That was the time when Barren Rocks paid its tribute to education. Everybody for miles around came in. Few drove, for the roads were too bad for much driving. Many walked, but most everybody rode horseback. And on the last day of school they would come—from up the river and from down, from the ridges and from far back among the hills. The men galloping along ahead, running races and trading horses; the women in their long black riding skirts sedately bringing up the rear! And by the time they all arrived, the playground would resemble the closing days of a big meeting. There would be recitations, dialogues, reading; addresses by the minister and the teacher; and early in the afternoon a great dinner, usually out under the pines. And after the dinner, the women would visit while they gathered up their knives and forks and spoons, while the men played baseball, leap-frog, and ran races. Finally the untying of horses, a few loudly-called good-byes, and each faced the long path back home.

I went home in a transport of joy, and told mother all about it. Father also listened, and when I was through he broke in.

"It is too far off to think much about it yet a while, son. You don't want to get excited over it so soon."

But mother did not seem to hear him. There was a glow in her cheeks. She pulled me over to her excitedly; and we went into the kitchen.

"It's great, sonnie," she began. "We will all be getting ready for it. And I can maybe get a dress of that sateen and have it ready to wear. Margaret will wear her good gingham. Tommy can wear his new Prince Albert."

"And I will speak a piece," I put in.

"Yes, you can speak a piece, and Henry and Margaret will get up a dialogue."

"I know what I want to say," and I danced around her. I usually bounced around when I got excited.

"What is it, sonnie?"

"The one that goes, 'Come, little leaf, said the wind one day.' "

"Just the thing. And Henry and Margaret can get Amiel's Dialogue on Hell. How fine it will be! I must go and see about that sateen."

She went in where father was while I explored the safe. We had no cupboard in our house, but we had a big safe made of oak. It was not nailed together, but fastened with wooden plugs. The doors were made of tin, all gouged full of holes. Down in the lower corner where I could reach easily, there was always sure to be something good. Mother said I should eat only at meal time, but always when I came home from school there was something tucked away in that corner of the safe. This time it was a big apple and some biscuit crust soaked in coffee. We called it soak, and it was one of the things we liked best of all. After I had eaten the apple and the soak, I went into the living room. Mother was sitting on father's knee looking out of the window.

"You think it can't be done, then?" she sighed, and I thought her lips quivered.

"I wouldn't say that, honey. You know they always run behind in the winter time. Nearly all I have received in over a month has been in wheat and corn. I don't object to that, for we need it. But it pinches us just a little."

"But it's a month away yet."

"That is just what I mean. I don't say it cannot be done. Maybe something will turn up yet. I go to the River appointment in two weeks, and I might get something then. Don't give up hope."

Mother looked at him quickly and kissed him.

"Tommy!" she said.

The next few days were a whirl of excitement. At school we took two hours off every afternoon to get the programme ready, and at home we were working on our pieces. It was at school that it was most real.

Ellie Herbert was to speak a piece called, "Diamonds in the Rough." She spoke it every afternoon, when her name was called, just as it would be on the last day. It ended up,

It ain't the britches or the coat you'll find that makes the man.
There's many a real jewel, too, though a diamond in the rough.

Ellie drawled her words out through her nose, and would drawl the last lines out with a kind of triumphant whine. Rude Hamilton was married and lived just across the river from us. When she heard how Ellie said her piece she said to mother:

"That's all right enough now. But I'll bet the time comes when she will be glad to get any man, whether he's a diamond in the rough or not. I wonder what makes them Herbert children so mortal ugly, Sister Rhodes?"

Grouchie McRand had a long piece of poetry entitled, "Just To Be Kind." It started off,

Just to be kind is my only thought,
  Just to be kind and true.
I help in distress wherever I ought,
  Just to be kind and true.

Hen said a girl ought to have that piece, and Grouchie did look funny when he stood up and snarled it off.

Hen's and Margaret's dialogue was fine. There was one place in it that never failed to work me all up. Hen said, in a sceptical disdainful way, "There is no hell."

Then Margaret replied desperately, waving her arms as if to implore the universe to be her witness:

"No Hell? There's Deacon Skinflint
  With his mortgages and rum,
Destroying widows' houses
  And driving them from home!"

She said the last line in such a heart-broken voice that I always boiled with indignation against Deacon Skinflint, and wondered how Hen could be unmoved.

One evening but a few days before the last day of school the teacher walked home with us. He said he wanted to see father and mother. I knew what he wanted with father, for father was always asked to address the students, but I couldn't think what he wanted to see mother for. To find out I hung around the room while they were talking. After asking father to make an address, he cleared his throat as he always did before introducing a new subject.

"And Sister Rhodes, I would like for you to help us out."

"Why, what could I do?" mother asked surprised.

"I thought maybe you would sing for us."

There was a silence. I was looking at mother. I hoped she would sing, for I loved to hear her. When she sang it wasn't dry like it was when father preached. His voice was hard and measured, and I did not like to hear him, only occasionally when he got all worked up. But when mother sang everything was still and her voice got all soft and mellow, and I would feel warm inside.

"Why, Brother Willet, I don't know whether I could sing well enough or not," but I could see the old romantic glow in her eyes, and she looked inquiringly at father.

"Of course she will sing," put in father. "She can beat anybody I ever heard sing," he finished.

"Now, Tommie!" mother said and blushed, but I could see she was pleased.

"But what will I sing?" she inquired.

"I thought you might sing 'The Ninety and Nine,'" the teacher said.

Shortly after that he left, and what with the great excitement, the Last Day quickly came round. It was a balmy day, the latter part of April. I was tickled that it was warm, for then I could go barefoot. I had worn my boots all winter, and although I had rubbed them carefully with tallow the night before, I was greatly relieved that I did not have to wear them.

We were close enough to the schoolhouse that we walked. Father walked a little in advance. Hen and Margaret came behind, practising their dialogue as they came. I walked by mother. She looked dainty and neat in her nice calico dress. She said she had fixed it over until it looked as good as any sateen dress could. And father declared she looked the best he ever saw her.

I had to sit up in front on a bench where all the others sat that were going to recite, but I looked back at mother. She smiled up at me.

The small children spoke first. When it was close to my turn I began to smother. I thought wildly for the first line of my piece, and was seized with panic when I couldn't remember it. The voice of the teacher recalled me.

"The next on the programme is a selection by Master Ben Rhodes."

I got up numbly and went forward. As soon as I began to move my composure returned and I felt complete master of myself. But when I made my bow and looked up, panic again came upon me. All I could see was a great field of eyes, and every one seemed fixed on me in a horrible glare. I got cold. Then I heard mother's voice.

"Come little leaf——" it prompted gently.

That seemed to release a dynamo of pent-up energy within me. I recalled the whole piece, but not line for line in the natural order. It came to me all at once, in bulk, so to speak. And my greatest desire was to empty myself of the whole thing in the quickest possible manner. I began in a torrent, and the words fairly rushed out. No one could understand a word I said, I am sure of that. But my business was to get through the lines, and I did it. Before the last line was finished

I was on my way headlong to mother's seat. But my very panic saved the day. It amused the people, and before I was off the platform they were clapping their hands and roaring with laughter. Maybe it was not a compliment. Certainly it might be looked at as denoting something altogether different. But I got a lot of comfort out of it, anyway.

When I sat down I at once began feverishly to recall each word and line. How had I said this particular part? and had I left out anything? I was still racking my mind trying to answer these questions when I was recalled to the present. Hen and Margaret were giving their dialogue.

I had heard them give it so many times that I knew just what it was about. Hen declared in the opening lines that it was not a bad thing for a man to drink rum if he wanted to. But here Margaret disagreed with him absolutely. She further said that every one that had anything to do with the business would go to hell sure. This was Hen's cue to say, in a very condescending tone, that there is no hell. And from that on the conversation was magnificent, ending with Margaret's horrible declaration that she would like to poke the fire when old Deacon Skinflint at last arrived in Pluto's realm.

They went up on the platform and bowed low. Hen thrust his hands far into the pockets of his jean trousers and curled his lip in a supercilious smile. Father had coached him long on that smile, and Hen had it down to perfection. Margaret, her blue gingham coming down well below her knees and her hair tied at the back with a big black ribbon, assumed an air of patient virtue. Father had worked with her, too, and she acted the part superbly.

With his supercilious leer, Hen made his initial declaration. At once Margaret took him up as one determined at all costs to rid the world of mistaken ideas. She declared forcefully that not only is it wrong for the man that actually drinks, but it is also wrong for the man who has anything to do with the business. And as though clinching her argument by an incontrovertible fact, she declaimed tragically that all such traffickers would end up in hell. Then came Hen's most leering rejoinder.

"There is no hell."

Margaret looked both shocked and indignant, as if she considered him not only as trying to justify evil, but also as doubting divine revelation. She waved her arms over her head and looked up at the ceiling as if imploring high heaven to be her witness.

"No Hell? There's Deacon Skinflint
  With his mortgages and rum,
Destroying widows' houses
  And driving them from home."

"Huh!" Hen answered her, scoffing, "it is not true."

And then Margaret took up her lines as a spirited charger answering the bugle's call. With Hen cringing under her terrible invective, she denounced him and his kind, and made a last terrible reference to the absent Deacon Skinflint, by ending,

"When you go down to hell, old man, I'd like to poke the fire."

There was wild applause. And so realistic had been the acting that I observed some casting scornful glances at Hen, as if he should be openly rebuked for taking the side of the ungodly.

Old Bill Herringer declared it was the best thing he ever heard, but Rude Hamilton later put a wet blanket on the compliment by asserting that he was half drunk when he said it.

It came time for father's address, but I paid little attention to what he said. I sat waiting impatiently for mother's song. And when at last she stood up, I thought she was wonderful. She looked tall and very slender as she stood up by the teacher's desk. Her neck was soft and white and round as it raised above her dress, and the great masses of her golden hair were piled high upon her head. She looked at me and smiled before she began, and I smiled back at her.

She was to sing The Ninety and Nine. Everybody liked it, for she had often sung it at the protracted meetings. When she began the first verse her voice was indescribably sweet and sad, and following the words I pictured to myself a fold in which the ninety-nine lay snug and comfortable, while far off on a bleak hill there was one that was lost. I could see it huddled up, cold and wretched, while the storm raged in fury about. But then the One braved the elements, climbed the mountain in the storm, found the lost sheep and brought it back to the fold.

Her low pitched voice filled the little room, and the words of the beautiful old hymn, rendered with great simplicity and pathos, filled us with a sense of the tragedy of an everlasting love. When she finished, her eyes were moist.

As she sat down by me I glanced over at the teacher. All was very still, and he was fingering his programme nervously and looking hard out of the window. When he got up to conclude the programme with his speech, his voice shook, and I knew why it was. Up to that time I had been unable to understand him, and I had feared him more than any one else in the world. But I understood him then, and ever afterward he was a different person in my eyes.

When the exercises were over, a great crowd pressed around mother. She was the centre of the group, and one after another told her how the song had been enjoyed. Father went over to her and towered above her, his whole face beaming with the pride that was in him. Father always said that mother would have been a great singer if she had not tied herself down to a little place like Barren Rocks, but she always answered by saying that she was satisfied with her bargain.

Henry Tolliver joined the group. Father often said that he was the best man that ever lived. He was old and white-headed and very kind. He took father by the hand.

"Well, well, Brother Rhodes. Shake hands with me. And Sister Rhodes, too."

Like the benign old saint that he was, he stood there holding both their hands. He was deeply moved, and seemed struggling with his emotion. Finally he spoke.

"Sister Rhodes, I never expect to hear that song sung like that again until I hear the angel choir up yonder," and he looked up to the sky.

Mother did not speak, nor did father. But I noticed him grip Henry Tolliver's hand tighter, and look at him gratefully.

But the group soon broke up at the call of dinner.

The men had fixed up a long table out under the pines, and at the conclusion of the programme the women had hurried out to it with their heavy baskets. At the call that all was ready, we went out. Father went up to the head of the table, and mother and I stood at his left. I looked down over the table with watering mouth. Great snowy cloths had been spread over the planks, and on these had been placed every conceivable delicacy. I fixed my eye upon a huge platter of chicken that was up near our end, and only waited a word from mother.

But just as I was poised for immediate action, father began to return thanks. His clear sonorous voice boomed out rounded and distinct, and I though he never would get through. He asked for a blessing upon the school, and the teacher; and he returned thanks for all our bounteous mercies until I almost despaired of his ever finishing. But when at last he did quit and mother took her hand off my arm, I fell to with an abandon that called forth more than one scandalised protest from mother.

In the midst of the meal, mother looked out and saw Esther Olliver coming slowly toward the table. Esther and her mother lived all alone in a little cabin up among the hills. They were very poor. People said they had to go out in the morning and gather greens for breakfast in the summer, and in the winter no one knew how they did manage to live.

Esther came slowly toward the table. She wore a dress of bright red, and her cheeks were almost bright enough to match it. Her hair was done up very high in front and made her face look very long. Her neck was thin, and I could see the leaders standing out on either side of it.

When mother looked out and saw her, her face softened. She spoke to father in an undertone.

"Tommy, there is that poor Olliver girl. She may be too timid to come up to the table, but I know she must be hungry. You go out and invite her here with us."

Father went out and cordially pressed her to join us. She came rather defiantly.

"Come on here, Esther, and help yourself with us," mother greeted kindly.

Esther came up and stood by the table. It was simply loaded with good things, and I wondered what she would take first. She looked thin and famished, and I was eager to watch her eat. She stood for a moment, looking boldly over the table from end to end. Then she sniffed contemptuously and turned her back on us all.

"Huh!" she snapped. "There ain't nothin' there I'd eat." And with that she marched haughtily away.

"Poor girl," was all mother said, and she followed her retreating figure with her eyes. Father shook his head.

"It is too bad," he said.

After dinner was over the men all went down to the playground for some contests. There was a ball game with the old men against the young; then there was a jumping contest, the standing jump, the run and jump, and the hop, step and jump. But the big thing for us was the running contest.

Of course I was not in it, for I was too little. But Hen was in it, and he had set his heart on winning. He was long-legged, and he said that would count in his favour. He had been undecided for a long time as to whether to take short steps and many of them, or long steps and fewer. But he finally decided that with his long legs it would be better to take long steps and fewer of them.

He had been practising on it for weeks, and he had it figured down to a fine point. He was to roll his trousers up, take off this boots and run barefooted. And he had worked out an ingenious gait. He was to shut his fists and stiffen his arms, and then as he would take his long strides he would swing his arms from the shoulder. He said that by swinging his arms in this way he could take much longer steps. Long before the time set for the running contest he had prepared for it. Taking off his boots and rolling his trousers up to his knees, he was swinging around the playground in his grandest style. I thought it was just marvellous the way he could cover the ground, but I was a little doubtful about it when I saw Bill Hunter begin to practise.

Bill was lean and short and supple, and he ran with the short step. The way he could tear down that field was awful. Hen watched him closely, but I saw he was not afraid. When he got his body swinging properly, his strides were enormous.

It was time for the race, and the teacher marked a line for the starting place. They were to run to the lower end of the playground and back. All was ready. The two toed the line. Hen, stiff arms sticking out; Bill crouched low on his wiry little legs.

"Go!" the teacher shouted, and they were off.

Bill made a quicker get away, and for a little ways he was in the lead.

"Got him beat a mile," some one pronounced pessimistically.

"Don't you think it," I spoke up.

I knew that when Hen got to swinging properly he would catch up. And sure enough they had not gone more than halfway down when he began to gain. His long arms swung wide and hurled him forward with mighty strides. When they reached the far end of the playground, they were even. But it was in the turning that things began to look bad for Hen. He had been going at such a terrific gait that he couldn't stop at once, and ran on past the line. When at last he turned about and started back, Bill had a pretty good lead.

"Hurry, Hen, hurry!" I yelled frantically.

And I could see that he was hurrying. He was putting up the race of his life. Stiff-legged, arms swinging, each swing catapulting him forward enormously, he certainly did hurry. I saw the veins standing out on his neck. His breath came in quick gasps.

But it was too late to cut down Bill's lead. Humped up and running as though for dear life, he shot past the line a full yard ahead of Hen. Hen didn't say much, but I could see he was greatly disappointed. He went off to one side and lay down on the ground.

The race was the last of the contests. Already it was beginning to get chilly. The sun had gone down over beyond Barren Rocks mountain, and the shadow of the mountain was flung over the playground. Far off up Little Creek the mountain fastnesses were becoming gloomy and sombre.

"Guess it's time to be getting home," some one said, and others expressed themselves in like manner.

Those that were walking began to leave first, and on the various mountain paths they soon could be seen, walking slowly, small pygmies of the great hills. Horses were unhitched, and, with man on in front and woman on behind, they were turned toward home.

We were among the last to leave, and when we topped the hill above the playground we stopped and looked back. A few papers here and there, out where the table had been; the schoolhouse shuttered and closed; an old bat out by the home plate; the grass worn off the playground at the bases; the laurel patch dark and deserted.

I felt very lonely. Everything seemed strange, unnatural, forsaken. The sun had gone down; the shadows were deepening. There was a permeating chill in the air. I had been glad that it was the last day of school. I had thought eagerly of the long summer days with no lessons to study; no hard problems to solve. But as I looked down on the deserted playground, I was not so sure.

Father's voice recalled me.

"Well, Ben, are you glad it's out?"

I nodded my head.

Then he went over and got mother by the hand.

"Anne, it was a great success," he declared.

Chapter 5

THE warm beautiful summer was passing like a golden dream. The first few weeks after the closing of school, I was content to wander aimlessly about, doing little in particular but revelling in my freedom and renewing acquaintance with the myriad forms of summer life. Father had early made a plough stock out of a piece of seasoned oak, and spent many of the days ploughing with the shovel plough on the steep hillside. I followed along in the furrow behind him sometimes, gathering up fish worms and mulligrubs, but as soon as I had found a few, I would go off to the mouth of the creek to fish for the big sun fish and goggle-eyes that lay lazily in the water.

The big chestnut in our yard was out in bloom, and the long white pencils of fuzzy blossoms fell upon the ground like a carpet of down. The river had lost the muddy hue of early spring, and was so blue I could see the gaping mouths of the mussels far down on the bottom. Occasionally I paddled around in our cut-off and poked a long slender stick into their mouths. As soon as it went in, they would close tightly on it, and hold on until I lifted them into the boat. Then I explored for pearls. And of these I had a growing and marvellous collection.

One lazy afternoon I crossed the creek and climbed slowly up the side of the mountain toward Buzzard Roost. Buzzard Roost was a great outjutting cliff that stood at the intersection of Little Creek and Elk River. On one side Little Creek had eroded the mountain until the naked rock stood out bold and bare; and on the other side Elk River had done the same. The result was Buzzard Roost. Shaped like a triangle lying prone with the base toward the hills, it pointed out like a giant wedge. Once reaching the base at the top, one could travel slowly out toward the point. The cliff itself was at best but a few feet in width, and the erratic little path that wormed out it sometimes disappeared altogether, and at others clung perilously near the edge of the cliff. In the dry shallow ground on the top there was just depth enough to support a few straggling huckleberry bushes, and here and there a low scrub pine.

I reached the base after a long hard climb up the mountain, and began my slow and precarious journey out to the point of Buzzard Roost. Here I would have to jump down off a ledge where the surface was uneven; then I would have to climb up onto a higher level. At one place I had to hold to a small pine while I leaned clear out over the ledge in order to get by. But I had been out that way so many times that I had no nervousness whatever.

When I had come to the end I jumped down to a lower shelf of rock, and for the thousandth time dreamed over the curious marks cut into the stone. Father said that in the early days the Indians had used Buzzard Roost as a lookout, and had cut these figures in the stones as a means of communication. Here was one that we took to be the figure of a dog, although its straight legs looked more as if they belonged to a wooden horse than to anything else. Then there was a queer series of circles, starting far down on the rock and decreasing in size as they came up. Hen said an Indian had cut a circle on the rock every time he had killed a man, and I would sit long thinking of the bloody struggles that had clustered about the place.

The end of Buzzard Roost was the place for dreaming dreams. Looking straight ahead in the direction that it pointed, I could see Elk River winding snake-like up between the hills. Far away was Johnson's Gap where there was a break in the ridge, and when the sun would get down behind it the red oaks would stand out in tall fantastic columns like some mighty tribe of forgotten giants.

I was sitting there in the sunlight watching the aerial wanderings of a great eagle. It was high up in the heavens, and winged its way toward Johnson's Gap, and then described a great circle and returned to the pine topped summit above Buzzard Roost. I thought of the stories that mother had told of the bald-headed eagles carrying off little pigs and lambs, and even children, and I was glad that I had grown too heavy for one to carry.

I saw father over on the hillside stop at the end of the field nearest home, unhitch the horse from the plough, and start toward home. I also got up to go, for it was one of my chores to ride the horse to the river after the day's work and let him drink. I put my hands on the ledge of rock above me to draw myself up, when I heard a smooth purring sound almost under my left hand. I glanced around quickly, and saw a great yellow rattler slowly contracting its body. I jerked my hand away quickly, but further than that there was little I could do. The ledge on which I stood was little more than three feet square, and save in the direction of the rattler there was a sheer drop on every side. The cliff dropped almost perpendicular clear to the water below.

There was little I could do save to stand in numb fascination and watch the rattler slowly coil itself up to strike. I knew it could not strike me where I was standing, but to watch the thing coil itself up was terrible. It twisted itself up layer on layer until its little slick head pointed in my direction and its rattlers nestled in the centre. Its eyes were hard and cold, and while they did not wink, there was about them a deadly glitter that made me shiver.

I wanted to call for help, but even if I could have been heard at home from where I was, I did not have the courage for one moment to take my eyes off that snake. I was beginning to get dizzy and it seemed to me, I was leaning ever closer to those little glittering eyes.

Just then there was a flutter and rustle of wings, and I had just time to see a long sleek neck and two long talon-like claws fasten themselves into the body of the snake. When I looked up in amazement I saw the eagle which I had observed before flying rapidly toward the pines on Buzzard Mountain, and hanging from its talons like an inverted U, was the limp body of the rattler.

When I reached home, faint and sick, I thought it best not to say anything. I had found it was not best to tell even mother everything.

One afternoon a few days later I walked lazily up from the river toward the house. The bumblebees were droning monotonously on the little white flowers on the sand briers. The long white pencils were falling from the chestnut tree. The river was placid and blue. Everything presented the lazy indolence of a warm summer day.

When I entered the front yard, I found father and Hen there busily engaged. The sight of them banished all laziness from my body, for I knew too well the portent of what they were doing. A great heap of carpet-rags was on the ground. Hen was tying the pieces together, while father rolled them into a big ball.

"What you doing, Hen?" I asked breathlessly.

"Making a ball for the light."

"What light?"

"Going gigging to-night."

"O, father, can I go too?" I implored.

He carefully made eight or ten circles around the ball, drawing each string tight. Then he spoke, much more emphatically than usual.

"Yes, sir, you most surely can go. Do you know whose birthday this is?"

"It's mine!" I shouted.

"It is. And this trip is for your birthday."

"O, daddie," I spluttered, so tickled I hardly knew what to do. We had been taught to call him father because it sounded more dignified when we went with him over his circuit, but when I got excited I sometimes called him daddie like I had when I was very little.

"Father," he said.

"Father," I corrected. "Who is to go with us?"

"You are to go, and sit up in the bow by the light. Samuel Aked and I will do the gigging, and Henry will guide the boat."

"Won't that be fun!" and I hurried away to talk it over with mother. Samuel Aked was the greatest gigger on the river. He had a long-handled three-pronged gig, and could hit a fish farther than any other man. Father came next, and he had a long two-pronged gig, with sharp beards on it. When the two of them got together, there was sure to be plenty of fun.

Just before dark Samuel Aked came into the yard carrying his gig.

"Ready, Brother Rhodes?" he called out in his big voice.

"Ready we are," father answered. "Fine night for them too—still and warm. Ought to see them to-night."

"Reckon we will see them all right. Too bad Ben can't go," he finished sadly.

"But I am going. This is my birthday, and I am to sit up by the light and watch you gig them.

"O well, then, that's fine. I was afraid you couldn't go with us," and he winked at father.

The great rag ball was soaking in a bucket of oil. Father got it, and his gig, and we all started down to the river. He took the ball out of the bucket and laid it dripping in the holder that stuck out over the front end of the boat like a landing net. I got in and sat down on father's coat in front. Hen got in behind and took up the paddle, and father and Mr. Aked stationed themselves on either side, up near the front. The boat was pushed off.

"Paddle down toward the shoals, Hen. When we get to shallow water I'll light the ball," directed father.

Hen paddled down to the top of the shoals. Father stuck a match to the ball, and the light flared away up, little drops of burning oil falling into the water. Each drop as it struck the water made a little lead-coloured spot that spread out in a circle. I looked down into the water and could see the yellow sand and the rocks for several yards on either side. Father was on the left side facing the front. I could see him look keenly at the stones and the small pieces of black wood that lay on the bottom. He held his gig with both hands, left down, and when the boat would tip over a little, the long black prongs of his gig would cut the water like a knife. Mr. Aked stood in a somewhat similar position on the other side.

Suddenly father's gig was jerked back quickly and quick as light was buried in the water.

"Ho, ho!" he cried a moment later. "How's that for the first shot?"

While he spoke he pulled up the gig. There was a great splash and confusion as it reached the surface, and he drew toward the boat a big red-fin that whipped its stocky body stubbornly. He drew it in to me.

"Pull him off, Ben. See him wiggle. How much will he weigh, Sam?"

"Nigh to five pounds, I reckon," Mr. Aked calculated.

I gleefully grasped the great fish on either side the gig and pulled it off. It was about the biggest red-fin I had ever seen.

"Don't grow much bigger than that," Mr. Aked allowed.

"Not much," agreed father complacently. "I thought at first it was the end of a log."

Time and again the sharp gigs zipped through the water, and about every time there was work for me to do. Soon I had a great pile down in front of me—suckers, red-fins, a few catfish and one pike. Mr. Aked had got the pike. It was in gigging fish like that that he beat father. Father was perfect when it came to the slow fish, but the pike and perch were too swift for him.

I had been looking at a great round rock on the bottom that threw a long shadow over the sand. As I was curiously watching it I saw a long pointed flash dart away from it. It was a great pike.

"Look," I began, but Mr. Aked's gig was swifter than my eyes. The fish was pretty far away, too far to allow him to hold to his gig handle. So he threw the whole thing clear out of his hands. It went through the water like a needle and then came to the surface bobbing nervously.

"Row over, Henry. I believe I got him," he said.

I could see he was nervous. If he had got that pike he had made history. Never before had we known a man to gig a pike when it was so far away he had to let his gig go out of his hand. Sure enough, when he leaned out and got hold of the handle he gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Well, well, so you really got him," exclaimed father in genuine admiration.

"Guess I did. Reckon he beats the red-horse, too," and he poked it down in front of me.

"Put your fingers in his gills so he won't flop away from you. I just hit him with one prong, and he's pretty lively, I allow."

I ran my fingers up in his gills from behind, and with the other hand grasped him tightly around his long slender body. I laid him down, and then began to arrange all we had got in heaps, according to their size, when I heard father exclaim:

"Look out, Ben!" There was a swish across my face and I looked up to see a long snake-like eel writhing and coiling around father's gig. It was a monster, and its slick body glistened in the light. I knew what it was, but the suddenness of the thing and its glistening body frightened me until I screamed.

"Take it off, Ben," laughed father.

"No. You take it off."

"Take it off. It won't hurt you," he persisted.

"I'm afraid of it."

"Hand it over here. I'll take it off," ordered Hen from the other end of the boat.

Father complied and the eel described a writhing arch overhead. Hen got the eel in his hand, but when he went to pull it off his hands were empty, and the tail of the eel flapped his face.

"Huh," he grunted in mortification, and grasped it again. Father roared with laughter, and Mr. Aked allowed that the thing must be pretty slick.

"Grip it," father directed.

Hen gripped it, but his very grip shot it out of his hand.

"Take it," he said shortly and picked up the paddle.

"Why, Henry, you don't give it up?" and father seemed greatly shocked.

But when Hen made no answer, he stood the gig up in the bottom of the boat, ran his foot down along the prongs, and the eel slipped off. Father seemed greatly satisfied.

"Well, let's go home. We have had our fun. What do you say, Ben?"

"I'm willing," for I was getting sleepy.

The next day I saw Grouchie McRand up at the store.

"Went gigging last night," I said indifferently.

"Get anything?" he asked, also indifferently. At least he attempted complete indifference.

"Thirty-one."

"Little ones, though."

"Big ones, and we got an eel."

"Bet they were not so big before you cut 'em up."

"They are not cut up. Come down and see them."

We went down home, and around back of the house where we had them in a tub. He looked them over carefully, fingering them for a long time. He picked up a little sucker and laid it to one side. Then he stood up, for all the world like a little old man. His expression was not pleasant.

"You ought to a put that little one back," he said.

"But what about the others?"

"O, right fair."

For Grouchie never could see a triumph when it was not his own.

Chapter 6

MARGARET was tall and slim and blue eyed. Her feet were ever so much smaller than mine, though she was much taller and older. Her ankles were soft and slender, and in the summer when she went barefooted, Hen and I called her slim legs. Her hair wasn't red, although at times it did look red. It was a lot like mother's, so I thought it was very nice.

Father called Margaret a dreamer. She read lots of books, though where she got them I never knew, for they were love stories—"trashy novels," father called them, in such a voice that I wondered how on earth she could find anything to interest her in such awful things. But she would read them—every one she could get hold of—and would sit for hours after finishing one looking dreamily out over the eastern hills.

We had a place down under the water-core apple tree where she and I went whenever we could get out to play together. She would sit up under the tree and read one of her books, while I made dams across the hollow. When the water had backed away up she would sit and flip little dried up apples down into it, and tell me all about what was in the book. Once it was about a girl who had lived all her life far back in the mountains with no one but her old father in the family with her. She had had but little to read except the Bible, so what she said was filled with quotations from it. One day a handsome stranger came up among the hills, and met her quite by accident. He was charmed by her simple dress and manner, and by her beautiful ways of expression that she had copied from the Bible. He was so interested that he staid with her father for quite a while; and finally they were married and went away. Margaret got all excited when she told me about it. Her eyes glowed, and she looked a long time at the waves where she had flipped the little apples. But I was not much impressed.

"Who cooked for her old father after she left?" I asked sternly.

"Why he—he—he, you see, what else could she do?" she answered.

"I don't think it was very nice of her to leave her old father up there all alone."

"But she could go back," she brightened up, "and bring him all sorts of wonderful things."

I couldn't just think of any answer to this, but I was determined to do all I could. I felt very just.

"Maybe he would starve to death before she got back."

She considered a long time. I could plainly see she was troubled by this aspect of the case. She also seemed aggravated that I should suggest such things when she was still stirred by the beauty of the story, but she finally settled me with a poser.

"But the man was wealthy, and he would leave her father well provided for."

I couldn't see any way around this, so I directed attention to my dam.

"See how far the water has backed up. When I get this big piece of sod fixed in here where it is leaking, it will go still higher. Wouldn't it be nice to have a lot of fish to put in it?"

"Wouldn't it be nice, Ben, if some one should come to Barren Rocks like that, and would come to our house, and—and," she looked dreamily off toward Johnson's

Gap. Presently she got up and went slowly toward the house.

I was surprised the next winter when several of the older boys began to come to our house and sit around the fire of evenings. At first they said they had come to see Hen, or they wanted to arrange to go hunting some night, or they wanted father to help them with their arithmetic. But they didn't take Hen out, and they would never fix any very definite time for the hunt. And often while father worked away at the problems they sat around and talked about something else.

Herb Ellanger came more often than any of the rest, and this was a matter of surprise to me. During my first year in school Herb had been as mean to me as he knew how to be. He would hide my hat, hit me with the ball when I was running bases, snatch my books out of my hands and say he was going to burn them up. But he now seemed altogether different. He got very good to me, and once even went so far as to bring me a twenty-two long cartridge for my arrow. And I got to liking him very much.

I went up to the store one day and he was there by the big Burnside stove. I went right up to him. He was nice, and in a little while got me a big stick of candy. Grouchie McRand saw him, and I could see he was mad. He swaggered up to me, and leered into my face.

"So. Margaret's beau has got to getting her little brother candy, has he?" he said so loudly that every one in the store heard him.

There was a general laugh, and I felt so ashamed that I slipped out as soon as I could before he had a chance to say anything more. I went home and hunted up mother.

"Mother, is Herb Ellanger coming to see Margaret?" I demanded.

Mother laughed nervously.

"I don't know, sonnie. Why?"

"'Cause Grouchie McRand said he was."

"When did he say that?"

"Up at the store."

"You mustn't listen to those boys up there, sonnie."

"But I couldn't help it."

"Then don't pay any attention to them. Come now and see what mother has for you," and she led the way to the kitchen. She had opened the apple hole that morning and got out some big red apples.

"Here's one for you, sonnie. Now run out and play."

I went out, but I was too perplexed to play much. Why any one wanted to go with Margaret was more than I could understand. I could see why Hen liked to go to see Herb's sister, Jane, for she was tall and pretty, with pink cheeks and she wore pretty clothes. I liked to visit at her house myself. But why Herb wanted to be coming to see Margaret was more than I could understand. Why, she was almost like me. She would run races and climb trees, and wash the dishes. And I knew every dress she had. I liked to see Jane in her good clothes for they were soft and pretty, and I had never seen many of them but once. But as for Margaret, I knew every dress she had, and I knew all about her. I could not see why any one wanted to go with her.

But I was still more surprised a few days later. Brother Hall was another minister that lived away up the river, and one day he was visiting father. They were sitting by the fire and arguing about Revelations. Father said that the Beast in Revelations was not the same one as that mentioned by Daniel, but Brother Hall said it was, and that by comparing the two he could tell almost to a day just when the world would come to an end. I sat and listened with shivers of terror running up my back, for the one thing that I dreaded above all others was the Judgment Day. Brother Hall said it could easily be shown that the end of the world was nigh.

As they were talking about it, Margaret came in. She took off a shawl that she had had around her shoulders, courtesied to Brother Hall and went out to the kitchen. Brother Hall looked after her a long time after she had gone. There was a sad reminiscent look on his face.

"How beautiful!" he murmured. Then turning to father he exclaimed fervently, "Brother Rhodes, if I had that girl ten million worlds wouldn't take her away from me."

"Margaret is quite a girl. She is a lot like her mother," and father's voice was very soft.

I went out to think it over. Margaret beautiful? Somehow I had never thought of her like other girls. She was just our Margaret. But other people seemed to look at her differently. When I went into the kitchen she was sitting by the stove reading a book. I went up to her, disgusted.

"So, missy, you have a beau," I jeered.

"Have not," she replied vehemently.

"Herb Ellanger. Huh!"

"Mother make Ben stop," she cried.

"Rich stranger coming in and finding a backwoods girl. Huh! You can't even quote the Bible, either."

"I can, too."

"Do it."

"Mother, make him stop."

"That will do now, sonnie. Run out and play."

The next Sunday was father's day at Oakum Mills appointment. He always left Saturday afternoon, for his churches were far apart, and the ride was long and hard. This time mother was to go with him, and Margaret was to stay at home and keep house for us. They left early in the afternoon, father riding old Bill and mother riding Bird.

How mother could ride! She was so supple she could put her hands on the horns of the side-saddle and jump into the seat from the ground without help. And she could ride all day without being tired. She looked so pretty and slim up in the saddle, too.

When they were out of sight, we all demanded that Margaret get supper. She looked her outrage, and said we had just had our dinner. That made no difference to us, for when mother was away we had things about like we wanted them. Margaret indignantly complied, and made us a big pot of potato dumplings. We ate them down to the last mouthful.

This done we proceeded to explore the house. There were places where we were strictly forbidden to go. Father's book desk, we never were allowed to open. Mother had a drawer in the press that she kept shut from us at all times. But when both were away we would go through everything, down to the last nook and cranny of the house. After everything had been explored and we were convinced we had not missed a thing, we killed two chickens for Sunday dinner. Then we went off into the woods to play.

Sunday morning we lay in bed as long as we wanted to, and only got up because we were so hungry. Margaret baked a big pone of corn bread and we ate it with the cane molasses somebody had given father at the River appointment.

After breakfast Hen spent a long time in the kitchen, with father's razor. He wouldn't let me come in, and after he had finished in there he went into the bedroom. I could hear him whistling and brushing. When at last he came out, his hair was slicked down all over his head, and his new jeans pants were brushed up in fine shape. He had on a collar that mother had done up. She always wrinkled them somewhere when she ironed them, but Hen had made the most of this one. He started out carelessly.

"Where you going, Hen?" I asked after him.

"O, guess I'll go down to see Herb," he answered back indifferently.

"Can I go with you?"

"No. You had better stay at home."

When he got out nearly to the road he called Margaret. I could not hear what he said to her, but whatever it was caused her to flare right up.

"No. I won't have it."

"Aw, Marg, why not? He said to ask you."

"I don't care if he did. I won't have it."

"I'll tell him all right," and he started off.

"You do and I won't let him in the house."

"What difference does it make to you? And it would mean a lot to him."

"I don't care. I won't have it," she repeated stubbornly.

"All right, then. You will wish some day you had." He started off.

The day was beautiful for winter. It was clear and still. The sun was off in the south, but it fell warm and cheerful around us. Margaret came in and stood looking out of the window. She had on an old green calico dress that did not come quite to her shoe tops. She had had it a long time, and only wore it now to do work in. The dresses she had got of late were much longer. Her back was toward me. Her right hand she held up against the window jamb. I had never noticed before how slender and white it was. She had not done up her hair yet for the day, and little wayward curls of it were falling about her neck. Her ankles below her skirt were firm and trim, proud in the first pair of button shoes she had ever had. I looked at her almost in amazement. She had changed somehow, and instead of being like she was the first year I went to school, there was something shrinking and appealing about her now. It made me feel sad. I went over to her and put my arm around her. She was so slim I could reach around her easily.

"What you thinking about, Margaret?"

"O, nothing," she answered lazily.

She turned round facing the room, shut her fists, put them up near her cheeks, and slowly extended them in a long lazy yawn. Her movements lifted her skirt still higher, she stood on her tiptoes, and seemed for a moment like some nimble, graceful elfin poised for flight.

"Let's play house," she suggested suddenly.

"All right," I agreed. I loved to play house with Margaret.

"I will live over here," she said, indicating the right side of the fireplace, "and you will live in the bedroom. I am old and you are coming to chop wood for me to keep me from freezing."

This plan offered possibilities, but too often it had been made real by my being sent out to cut some stove wood. I didn't think Margaret wanted any wood brought in, and yet I did not want to take any chances. I suggested something else.

"No, let's play something else. I have it. You be sick with the fever and I will be the minister coming to see you."

I had gone with father to visit a sick woman a few days before, and the awful solemnity of it had given me many a thrill. I longed to play the part of father and do as he had done.

"All right," Margaret agreed. "You go into the bedroom while I get ready."

When I came back out with a Bible under my arm, Margaret was lying on the floor in her corner looking very feeble. Her whole body sagged with weariness, and when she moved she moaned wretchedly. I knocked softly on the back of a chair.

"Come in," she called weakly.

I walked in and sat down beside her.

"My dear Sister Evans, I am grieved to find you in this condition," I announced.

"Yes, but of course we never know," she smiled wanly.

"You are right. We are often made perfect through our suffering."

I picked up her hand and stroked it encouragingly. It lay limply in mine.

"You must bear up bravely, Sister Evans. The Lord knows best."

With a great effort she carried her handkerchief to her eyes and covered them gently.

"Perhaps we had better have a word of prayer," I suggested, moved profoundly.

I knelt down soberly, cleared my voice, and was just ready to begin a prayer "for the afflicted sister" (I remembered father's words vividly) when there was a sharp rap on the door.

Margaret sprang up as if electrified, all the weariness vanishing like a flash. She ran to the door and flung it open. Herb Ellanger stood outside. He smiled in his sickly manner.

"Morning, Margaret. Hen said you were expecting me."

She gave one despairing glance at herself, looked around the room nervously and then back at Herb.

"Good morning, Herbert," she said in a constrained voice. "I am glad to see you. Won't you come in?"

"Thanks," he said awkwardly, and walked in.

" 'Lo, Herb," I called out.

He seemed vexed at seeing me.

"Morning, Ben. How are you to-day?"

"Fine. We were just playing doctor when you came in."

Margaret looked hard at me, but I continued glibly.

"Yes, Margaret let on she had the fever, and I was the minister coming to see her. She was——"

"Excuse me a minute, Herbert. I'll be back in a minute." And she disappeared into the bedroom.

Herb was silent for some time.

"Got any traps set this winter, Herb?" I inquired.

"No. I'm not trapping any this year."

"I got a lot set."

"Caught anything?"

"Not yet. But I look to have something to-morrow."

I could not get him to talk freely. He seemed dreadfully nervous. His face resembled one of the old Egyptian paintings in the back of father's big Bible, in that both his forehead and his chin receded sharply, leaving his nose the most prominent part about him. His chin was very small. There was really nothing from his nose down, until his Adam's apple was reached. It was simply enormous. When he talked it had a way of bobbing up and down like a bobber on a fish line.

Hen went with Herb's sister, Jane, and Herb wanted very much to go with Margaret. He was afraid to ask her. She hated him because of his Adam's apple. He must have sensed it, for he seemed very much afraid of her. He even sent Hen to ask her whether he might call. And Hen had lied about what she said, perhaps to make Jane think better of him.

Margaret came out of the bedroom before long, and I could see she was mad clear through. For when she got real fighting mad, there was a little white circle all around her mouth. And when she came out of the bedroom she was white all over her face. But she was a little whiter around her mouth than anywhere else. She had put on her best dress and done up her hair nicely, and I could see that she was determined to treat him just as nicely as possible. But even that wouldn't be very much; and I had some idea what was in store for Hen.

They talked very little. I wondered whether I should go out and leave them alone. But Margaret kept hold of my hand most of the time, and I took from that that she wanted me to stay. I really didn't care, for I was getting interested. I hoped she would fly mad and send him home, or do something else terrible.

He told about an extension they had made to their barn; and she said she hoped it would hold their crops now. He reckoned it would, although they were preparing for bumper crops the next year. Then there were long periods when nothing was said. He swallowed hard frequently, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down. Occasionally he put his finger inside his collar and stretched his neck to one side, as if trying to get a little more room.

Margaret seemed greatly relieved when it was time to get dinner. I went out to the kitchen with her. I hoped she would break into a tirade, and she did—almost.

"You just wait until Hen comes back here. I told him I didn't want him. And I thought Herb Ellanger could have seen I didn't want him to stay for dinner! You just wait until he comes home."

But she got a good dinner. She cooked the two chickens we had killed, made a fine pie, and mashed some potatoes. She also got out a can of mother's apples. I was glad of this, because those canned apples were not an every-day thing at our house.

When everything was ready she sent me for Herb. He came out awkwardly and sat down in father's place. I sat at his left, close up to the dish of apples. Margaret looked terribly upset when we had sat down and were all ready to begin. Then she asked Herb to return thanks.

We never thought of eating at our house without returning thanks, but I had often heard father say that he was afraid Brother Ellanger was not setting the example before his children that he should. When Margaret called on Herb to return thanks, he looked utterly nonplussed. Then he swallowed, and his Adam's apple shot back with a jolt. But he folded his hands in his lap, leaned over until his hair nearly got in the gravy, and mumbled a few words that I could not understand.

As soon as he looked up, I got the dish of apples in both hands. I was a little uncertain what to do, but since father was gone I felt that something was expected of me. I held it over right under his mouth.

"Have some apples, Herb," I urged cordially.

He took the dish from me, and swallowed. But Margaret had the chicken in her hands, and silently passed it to him. He took it with his other hand, and sat there helplessly, the apples in one hand, and the chicken in the other. He seemed hopelessly confused.

"Just set the apples down, Herbert, and help yourself to the chicken," Margaret suggested.

He seemed greatly relieved, and did as she suggested. After that everything went off fairly well. But when he and I had gone into the living room, it took Margaret a long time to get through with the dishes. Herb had begun to fidget long before she appeared, and when she did come in he said it was time for him to go.

"I have the stock to feed, so I guess I better be going."

He got up and reached for his hat. Margaret stood by the fire watching him.

"You all come over, Margaret," he said.

"Thank you, Herbert, we will," she said firmly.

She closed the door after him.

She came back into the room and walked the floor like a caged panther. The little white circle was very prominent about her mouth.

"Are you in love with Herb, Margaret?" I queried.

She stopped walking the floor and glared at me.

"No, I am not. And when Hen comes home I will tell him a few things, and don't you forget it."

Hen stayed away later than usual. When he did open the door and step inside, he faced us with a propitiatory grin.

"Honest, Margaret, it was all right," he began at once.

"I don't care if it was all right. I didn't want him around."

"Did he tell you about his barn?"

Margaret almost choked.

"Yes, and about the chickens and the cows," and she burst into wild laughter.

I was frightened, but Hen was not. He continued to grin.

"Did you notice his Adam's apple?"

"Now, Hen, you shut up. I just won't stand it," and she fled to the kitchen.

Chapter 7

WE were all sitting in by the fire when there was a sudden rap on the door. It was a dark night, and we supposed Rude Hamilton had come over to spend the evening with us, as she was afraid to stay alone in their house, and her husband was away for days at a time. We didn't expect it to be a stranger, for when strangers came around, they usually sat on their horses out in front and called "Hello" until father went out to see what they wanted. When we heard this knock father called out, "Come in," without even getting up.

The door opened and a stranger entered. He was tall, dressed in black, and looked very handsome. He looked at us a moment, and advanced toward the fire. Father got up.

"Good evening, stranger," he said. "Come up to the fire. Right cold out to-night."

"It is that," the stranger replied easily, advancing and rubbing his hands. "I have just come down from Big Town, and it is right chilly on the river."

"Come down a horseback?"

"No. I had some luggage, and a man brought me down in a boat. Pretty cold in a boat."

"Drummer?" I hoped he was a drummer, for they came to the store and told stories and smoked cigars. They usually staid all night with old Alex McRand, but maybe this one had come to stay with us. Father knew a lot of the drummers because he sometimes staid in the store when the regular men were away.

"No, not a drummer, quite. Fact is, I have been exhibiting around the country the great invention that you have doubtless heard about, the graphophone. I wanted to give an exhibition at Barren Rocks, and the people I put up with at Big Town said you would be the man to see about getting permission to give it."

"Did you bring it with you?" father asked. I could see he was excited about it. Father was always greatly interested in things that went on "outside," as mother called the world beyond Barren Rocks. She often said she was sorry he could not be in a big city where he would come more in touch with things.

"Yes, I have it outside. I thought I wouldn't trouble bringing it in, for I will have to hunt some place to stay all night yet."

"You will stay all night right here. Where is your graphophone? We will bring it in, and perhaps you are not too tired to explain it to us."

"Thank you very much for letting me stay with you over night. This is better fortune than I expected. We will go out and get my luggage."

I had never heard any one thank another for letting him stay all night. That was something that we took for granted. No one ever asked if it would be all right. People just came in and sat down to stay and that was the end of it. Nevertheless I thought it sounded nice in this man, and when he and father had gone out I spoke to mother.

"Isn't he nice, mother? And, mother, what is a graphophone?"

Mother was excited too.

"It is a talking machine, sonnie. It is a thing that will sing and talk like a person."

"Is it a parrot, mother?"

"No, sonnie. It winds up like a clock, and then sings and plays."

"Did you ever see one, mother?"

"No, but I have read about them. They are wonderful. Here they come."

Father and the man entered. They carried between them a long box, and put it on the floor.

"So this is a graphophone! Well, well. Does it really talk?" father asked.

"O yes. This is the latest make. Sometimes it don't do very well, but usually it is clear. They are a wonderful invention."

"Ask him to open it, mother," I implored.

"Be quiet, sonnie. He will open it if he wants to."

The man heard what I said.

"Of course I'll open it. You give a hand, Mr. Rhodes, and we will soon have a concert all to ourselves."

I became greatly excited.

"Do keep still, Ben. Quit hopping around," Henordered.

The graphophone was in a box with a hinge top. The man unfastened the catches, and turned back the lid. He then lifted off a covering of black oilcloth. I gasped at what was revealed. There was a great horn such as I had never seen before. From its small base it flared out to an enormous size, and was painted green with gold trimmings. There was also a little box-like affair which the man lifted up and put on the reading table. He wound at it, and then fastened the horn to it, suspending it like a derrick, from an ornamented gold chain. All the time he worked at it he explained to father, who stood by the most interested I had ever seen him. Finally the man looked up at us with a smile.

"Now we are ready to play," he said, as he bent over the machine and made some adjustments.

Then he stepped back. There was a low squawking sound from the graphophone, a strident hectic noise that was like the squeak of a rabbit or the cry of the chicken hawk. There was also a muffled grating such as Hen made by drawing his fingernail over the rough parts of the blackboard. Then the machine stopped suddenly.

"Huh!" grunted the man. "Must be a little tight from the cold. I'll just wind it up again. Maybe it will go better the next time."

He worked at it for a few minutes, made some fresh adjustments, and stepped back. Again there was the squawking and the grating. But this time there was something more. Faint at first and unintelligible, there was a medley of sounds as of confused voices. Then the general hubbub subsided, and a lone voice issued from the instrument. It was low and ridiculously small, like the voice of some wee dwarf straining to his utmost to produce the effect of a full grown man. It was going at a frightful speed, and it was impossible to tell what was said.

Now, I felt downright ashamed. At first I had been all curiosity, and as he had made his adjustments, I stood with mouth, eyes and ears open, determined not to miss a single thing. But when the little dwarf began to bray forth his hybrid air, a feeling came over me that all was not as it should be.

I looked at the man. He was standing in triumph over the machine, looking as though every word that issued from it were a compliment to him. I had thought there was some mistake; that the instrument was not performing properly. But his air of triumphant satisfaction made it clear that the fault was with me, and not his beloved graphophone.

Next I glanced over at father. He sat like a graven image, his head to one side and his brows puckered, as if carefully weighing the merits of the great invention. And I could see that he was impressed.

Then I looked at mother. Her attitude was not one of absorbed attention. She looked over at father just as I looked at her. And when her eye caught mine, it held a merry twinkle. I tittered. She motioned to me, and I went over to her and sat down on her lap. When the selection was finished, there was a moment's silence.

"Isn't it a funny thing, mother?" I asked.

But father's voice, as he discussed the merits of the wonderful invention, completely drowned my own. According to Mr. Gardner—for that was the man's name—it was the most wonderful triumph of modern times; and father agreed with absolute conviction.

There were a few other selections, all in the same squawking voice, a few more explanations and comments, and the entertainment was over. It was arranged that father and Mr. Gardner should go to the trustees of the school the next day, to arrange for having the entertainment in the schoolhouse.

The next morning we started out, for I had got permission to go along. We crossed the river to go to see old Herb Ellanger first. He was big and fat and crabbed. He usually wore an old faded blue shirt, and stuffed his jeans pants into his boot tops. There was something wrong with one of his eyes, although it looked all right. But he couldn't see out of it, and when he talked to a person he turned his head to one side and glared balefully out of the good eye.

We found him out at the barn.

"Good morning, Parson," he said with as much grace as he could muster.

But he did not speak to Mr. Gardner. Rather, he fixed on him his one sound eye and contemplated him steadily with a fixed and pessimistic stare. Mr. Gardner had seemed very versatile and resourceful at our house, but he coloured under old Herb's gloomy gaze. He seemed greatly relieved when father took upon himself the task of explanation.

"A graphophone, hey? And what do them there things do?"

Father told him explicitly and with considerable detail, but old Herb seemed unenthusiastic.

"And what is to be the price for gittin' in?"

Mr. Gardner here spoke up, eagerly.

"Only fifteen cents for adults, and ten for children."

A cunning look came into the sound eye. He rolled it up and looked at the sky meditatively.

"And what about the trustees, hey?"

"Why, I'll let you and your family in free, of course. That is for the use of the schoolhouse, you know."

"Well, I don't know as I keer nothin' much about them things, but I guess you might as well go ahead and give it."

We left him standing just outside the barn, his hands in his pockets, looking fixedly after us.

Our next man was Alex McRand. He was short and bald and stolid. I heard father tell mother once that the surest way for him to get the blues was to talk for an hour with Alex McRand. His eyes were cold, his nose blunt, and he was heavy jowled. His mouth set in a hard line, and when he talked he jerked out his words in cold, dispassionate sentences that made me lose all my enthusiasm whenever I heard him. Father said, though, that you could not expect much more from an Advent. But he held to his faith in the same cold way that he held to his store. It made father mad when he closed up on Saturday. And on Sunday mornings as we went by to church, he sat in the door of his store and watched us go by with his hard, impersonal stare.

With him, Mr. Gardner undertook the explanations. He listened without a word, looking stolidly at Mr. Gardner's mouth as he talked, as if estimating the number of movements his lower jaw made. When he had finished, it was some time before he spoke.

"You are a stranger in these parts?" he asked, in a tone that implied that a stranger in these parts should be watched with suspicion.

"I regret that I do not live here," he answered with a smile.

"Regret it? Why do you regret it?"

"Why, I—I merely meant that—that——"

Father interrupted.

"It is really a wonderful thing, Brother McRand. I heard it last night. It would be well to have the people hear it."

"I'll let you have the schoolhouse, provided I don't have to pay to get in," he said to Mr. Gardner.

"Certainly, Mr. McRand. That always goes without saying. Thank you."

Estil Hankerton was the last, and I knew he would consent. He always consented—that is, if his wife allowed him. His sandy moustache drooped down and hid his wavering mouth; but what he lacked in the way of resolution his estimable wife made up, and with interest.

He greeted us with an apologetic smile, and gave his consent without protest. But as we were leaving for home, he came out and called to us. We waited until he came down. He smiled feebly.

"My wife—that is—she will want to come, and——"

"Certainly, Mr. Hankerton. I'll see that she gets in."

"Pretty shrewd at bargaining, aren't they?" father asked as we went on toward home.

Mr. Gardner smiled.

"Always. And it may look more that way to-night."

"You mean——"

"Wait and see."

It was almost noon when father and I got back. Mr. Gardner stopped with Alex McRand for dinner.

"Is it all right?" mother asked.

"Yes. All right, but," he added with a smile, "they made him promise to let them in free for the privilege."

"I knew Mame Hankerton wouldn't let thing like——" But father looked at me and then at her and she checked herself abruptly. "I hope they have a good entertainment," she finished.

"How much is the admission to be?" Hen wanted to know.

"Fifteen cents for adults and ten for children."

"Will we go?"

"Certainly we will go."

Father always said he was willing to support anything that was for the good of the community.

It was always a mystery to me how news spread about over the country. There were no telephones, no trains, and the mail came usually once or twice a week—in good weather. But news did spread.

That afternoon people came by our house and stopped to talk about the great entertainment. And long before dark stragglers began to gather at the store, where they would stay until time to go to the schoolhouse.

Before dark Hen rowed the boat across the river and climbed the hill toward Ellangers'. In about an hour he came back, looking greatly elated. Herb Ellanger came with him. But he stopped at the gate while Hen came on into the house. Margaret was out in the kitchen, and Hen went on through.

A little later I heard the kitchen door close, and Margaret appeared from around the house. She went out and shook hands with Herb. From my point of vantage at the window, I could see them easily, although I could not hear what was said.

Herb looked up and down the river, scrutinised the heavens rapidly, and swallowed hard. I saw his Adam's apple bob up and down, and imagined that Margaret was watching this same organ with a critical eye. Herb was very nervous and his neck was red. But at last he managed to say something. Margaret shook her head decidedly a time or two, but he persisted, evidently urging upon her the advisability of a course of action. But their parley ended and she came slowly into the house. Hen met her.

"Did you?" he inquired.

"No, I didn't did you!" and she went back to the kitchen.

We got ready before it was time to start, and started before it was time, but father always liked to get to places early so he would have time to talk to the people.

But there was no one to talk to when we got to the schoolhouse. There were only a few boys standing outside. So we did not stop there, but went directly in. Father and mother sat in one seat, well up toward the front, and Margaret and I sat just behind them. The teacher's desk had been moved to the centre of the platform, and on it the graphaphone had been placed, the great horn pointing back toward the benches.

Before long there was quite a commotion outside. Some one was coming in. I turned to look, and saw Hen and Jane. Jane looked much excited, and her face was very red. But Hen was as cool as a cucumber. He marched Jane up to a seat just behind us, and they sat down. I thought Hen looked handsome. His hair was slicked down over his head, and there was a mark where his hat had been. Hen looked smart, too. The way he puckered his brows and looked about, made him appear extremely intelligent. And he was.

We could soon tell from the noise outside that others were coming. Mr. Gardner was standing at the door to collect the admissions. He had got six admissions from us, although I came in for ten cents. When Hen had asked for some money, father said that he ought to try to get in for ten cents. But Hen got very angry, and said he would try nothing of the kind. So he and Jane came in as adults.

Estil Hankerton and his family were the next to arrive. Mrs. Hankerton came first, and importantly brushed by Mr. Gardner, saying nothing about admission. He put his hand out in front of her, and she regarded him coldly. I don't know what she was going to say, for Estil came meekly up and explained. Now Estil Hankerton was old, and he and his wife lived at home by themselves. But he had three married daughters and two married sons. Between them the daughters had eleven children, and the sons seven. That made twenty-nine in the family, all told.

They were all out in force. Mrs. Hankerton swept grandly up front, followed by Estil, meek and apologetic. The children and the children's children filed in after them. Mr. Gardner put his hand out in front of the first son:

"Admissions, please," he said.

Mrs. Hankerton, Senior, heard him, just as she was settling in her seat. She got up with great dignity, and walked back to the door. She confronted Mr. Gardner.

"Mr. Showman, these are my children, and the trustees and their families gets in free," and she swept back to her seat.

With an apologetic bow, Mr. Gardner stepped back and motioned them to enter. They filed in and filled up a large section of the seats.

Two boys came in next, and paid their ten cents hurriedly, saying they were under twelve. I knew they were not, for Ed Rainey was thirteen, and Bill Hunter was seventeen.

Old Herb Ellanger came next, and in addition to his family he brought some of his wife's friends from over the river. But none of them paid. He fixed his sound eye coldly on Mr. Gardner.

"Well, we are here," he announced with a frosty smile, and waved his hand toward those that were with him.

"Glad to see you out," Mr. Gardner murmured as they passed by him, but the smile that he summoned to his face was twisted.

Mother leaned over and whispered something in father's ear. I was getting greatly interested, for I began to see what the man had meant when he told father the folks were not done driving bargains.

A few others came in. One woman carried a big boy as if he were a baby, so she would not have to pay for him. But I was not so much interested in them. I was waiting for old Alex McRand. He was the richest man in the country, and I was wondering what he would do.

Soon Grouchie swaggered up to the door, said he was the son of a trustee, and darted for a seat. Following him were old Alex and his wife, their daughter and her husband, and an older son. None of them paid.

The house was well filled when the entertainment began. The graphophone did not perform very well. The little dwarf tried in vain to get his voice to soar, but it was a pretty discouraging effort. Mr. Gardner explained before each selection, just what it was to be. And by imagining hard I was able to get a fair effect;

but the audience muttered frequently, and from the tone of their whisperings it was plain that they were disappointed.

The entertainment broke up amidst a general hubbub. Father clapped his hands in a vain effort to create some enthusiasm, but the effort was not a success. He went over and shook Mr. Gardner's hand.

"Well, sir, that was very good. I am glad you came around. We don't have enough things like this up here."

As he was speaking Alex McRand came up. His mouth was set in the usual hard lines, and his look was surly.

"Well, stranger, if that's what you call your wonderful invention, I'm glad I didn't invent it," and he walked stolidly away.

Estil Hankerton started up, a look of mild interest on his face, but his wife laid a hand on his arm.

"Come, Estil. We have no more time to waste here."

Mr. Gardner heard, and again he smiled the twisted smile. He turned to father.

"Well, anyway," he said, "we took in a dollar and eighty cents."

"A dollar and eighty cents?" father said, surprised. "Why, there must have been near a hundred here."

"There were," Mr. Gardner answered, still with the twisted smile.

Chapter 8

BARREN ROCKS was beautiful in June. Even very early in the spring the woods were dotted white with the dogwood; and a little later the redbud flamed out its contribution to nature's picture. And when the service-trees lifted their long white branches out, we knew that summer was in the air.

But by June, everything was out. The leaves were full, and the warm sun drew from the hills a savoury woodsy smell that brought a great peace. It was along in June, too, that the river began to go down, and deep white sand bars cut in here and there where the yellow waters had swirled swiftly during the winter. Little Creek dried up in many places, and the stones on the bottom were white and hot. The fish went into the deep holes and got in the shade of the big rocks. It was real summer.

We had had an early spring. In the middle of April father got out the shovel plough, and I followed along behind him in the furrows, burrowing my bare feet into the warm earth, picking up rounded and curious stones, and looking for mulligrubs. We had cleared off a piece of new ground during the winter, and it ploughed up black and fallow. The plough jerked along through it, pulling out the tender sumac roots. I liked the new ground. There were no fish worms or mulligrubs in it, only little wriggling bugs with short legs and pink backs.

But the ground was fragrant and soft. And it was rich. Corn planted in it soon shot up a rich dark green.

We ploughed our garden early, too. And we had hauled many loads of rotten leaves from the creek bed and scattered over it. Then in the rich warm earth we planted our garden—radishes and cucumbers, beans, corn and all. The rains came just right, and father declared that everything was bound to grow that spring.

But one day in late June it was very hot and very still. The little white oaks up on the hillside were standing very still, their white furry leaves drooping with the heat. The big trees on the mountains were still, and only at times did they stir. Even then it was only in certain places, as if some fitful breeze had singled them out for special favours. Waves of heat radiated from the dry stones on the dry creek bottom. It was very hot and dry and calm.

Along in the afternoon the wind rose slightly. It blew in warm unsteady gusts, bending the trees down for a moment, and then dying down again.

The sky became slightly overcast, then more so, and far over in the south-west it took on a sickly yellow hue. This spread rapidly, and soon great yellow clouds came bellying up, carried swiftly along by the gathering wind. They became more general and the wind rose higher.

It was not long before they looked angry and malignant. As the wind blew them along, little spirals shot out from the main body like swift scouts reconnoitring the way. And always the sickly yellow.

We were standing in the yard watching. Father spoke.

"Henry, you and Ben go to the stable and see that everything is safe. Margaret, you put down all the windows, and we will get inside. There is going to be a terrible storm, and it will be hail too, if I know anything about it."

When Hen and I returned the others were inside. The windows were down and it was dreadfully hot. But father said it was safer that way.

It was not long before it came. Looking up the bottom, we first saw a number of big round drops fall heavily to the ground. They came nearer, until they splashed noisily about the house. I saw them fall on the white stones, making big black spots where they fell. When they fell on the road little pencils of dust shot up, only to fall back and curl up in small wet discs.

The rain increased. Up the bottom we saw it coming in great white sheets, and where we could catch glimpses of the river we saw the drops bound back as they hit the water. It gave the appearance of some great infuriated monster shaking and snarling and snapping to free itself from the stings of a deadly insect pest.

And the water was lashed into white foam.

We thought we saw the hail coming, but it was not until it struck on the clapboard roof that we were sure. Then we saw it falling in the yard. Great white balls hit the ground and bounded high into the air. It fell harder and harder. I was so interested in watching it that I did not notice father until I saw mother look at him anxiously. He was standing at the side window looking out toward the garden and the corn field. He met mother's glance, and his face was drawn.

"I'm afraid it's all up, honey," he said.

He drew mother over toward him, and they stood looking out.

I ran to the side window to see. The great pieces of hail were falling on the garden and corn field and shattering everything they fell upon. The corn stalks were stripped almost bare. They were bent and twisted where they stood at all. For the most part they were bent far over, and the few stringy blades that were left were being beaten into the earth.

For over an hour the storm continued, and never for a moment did it abate. The heavy yellow clouds heaved up like gigantic monsters freighted with plague, dropped their destructive burdens and lumbered on, making room for the others that were to follow. Ragged blotches of mist swirled fantastically under them, and the angry tendril scouts shot down the sides of the mountains.

When it was over the sun, hanging low over Johnson's Gap, shot its rosy rays down upon a world of ruin. We hurried out to look. The garden was a shamble. Everything was stripped bare, and as if that were not enough, great piles of hail were banked up against the tender roots, and before they melted even the roots were killed. It was clear there would be no gathering of crops that fall. Our garden, our corn—all that we had, was ruined.

The next day every one that went by our place had the same story to tell. The storm had been general. Up the river, over on the ridges, down the river, and back among the hills, the storm had visited each place with impartial fury, and the work of the year had been destroyed after it was too late to begin over again.

The atmosphere at the church the next Sunday was sombre. Long before time for the service the people gathered, the women going inside and talking excitedly; the men staying outdoors, sitting on fallen logs and stumps, whittling carefully and telling of the catastrophe in exact appraising voices, each of which seemed to contain an element of triumph in being able to make more graphic and terrible than the previous, every incident that had befallen.

But underneath all there was the feeling of terrible loss. Back in the mountains where we lived each man's little farm was his principal source of supply. The outside world was distant and unreal, and even had it not been, there was no money with which to buy. This storm then meant a hard winter, how hard we were all in time to find out.

When father appeared at the church he seemed haggard, like some one who had been wrestling with secret and unknown powers. And while he sat and talked with the men as usual, opening his great bone handled knife and whittling at a splinter he had broken off a twisted tree, there seemed about him some secret undercurrent that made the conversation somewhat constrained. Finally he got up and shut his knife with a snap.

"Well, brethren, it's time for us to go in."

One after another the men got up, straightened themselves out awkwardly, and filed solemnly into the church.

The church was built of logs—long pine trees that had been cut in the hills, hewn out with the broad-axe, notched at the corners and laid together. The benches were made of the same material, the under side round, some even having the bark still on them, the top side hewn smooth. On each side of the room was a great burnside stove, now rusty and cold, with the inside filled with twigs and leaves. Father went up into the pulpit in front, which was a slight platform with a small wooden pulpit in front.

He got up and looked over the congregation slowly. Usually his face was somewhat hard, and his voice as he spoke had a metallic sound that made me think of ice or cold iron in the winter time. But to-day his haggard look made him seem more sympathetic, and his voice made me feel that he understood very much about things. There was only one song book in the church and he had it. He announced the first hymn, read the first two lines, and commanded us to rise and sing.

Without an organ, without books, with only the reading of the words to help us remember them, we started. Mother led, and her voice was clear and sweet as it followed in a slow undulating manner through the pleading lines of the old song:

Come, thou fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.

When we had finished this part we all stopped, and father read the second part of the first stanza, and so on until we had sung the whole hymn. When the time for the sermon came, the men leaned back in the benches, and stretched out their legs, scraping the floor with their boots as they did so.

Father took as his text, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy." There was a tightening of tension over the whole church as he spoke the words. The women's faces wore a patient look, but the men seemed rather defiant, at least non-committal.

"Brethren," father began earnestly, "these words are true. We have just recently passed through a very trying experience, but these words are true, and are a very present help in time of trouble."

Slowly and with measured words he spoke to us, his voice seldom lifted very high, but always throbbing with an awful conviction. A man was making bricks on a certain farm, he told us, and wanted the sun to come out and bake them hard. He prayed for warm and dry weather. A second man living near was raising corn, and he wanted abundant rain to make his corn grow. He prayed for showers. Now, could the Lord please them both? To satisfy one would be to deny the other. So maybe what had been a calamity for us had been a blessing to some one else. We must not doubt the providence of God. Also, we were limited in our understanding. A man saw but the corner of a great painting. He thought it was but an unsightly blotch of paint. But when the cover was removed and he saw it all, it was a thing of symmetry and beauty. So if we could see all, we would understand the place of the storm in the divine plan.

There father paused and his face blazed with a terrible conviction. There was another point, he said. Israel's calamities had come upon them as the result of sin. They had been unfaithful, had forsaken the true God, and were punished as a result. Perhaps there were sinners in our community that had brought upon us this terrible thing as a result of their wrongdoing. And he closed with an appeal for men to repent and flee from the wrath to come.

After the benediction the people stood around uncertainly, waiting. A drummer who had been delayed in Barren Rocks over Sunday had come out to church, and after the sermon he hurried up to father.

"An admirable discourse, Doctor," he said holding out his hand.

Old Jud Brian, a giant mountaineer from back among the hills came up and elbowed him away roughly. He stuck out his great hand and gripped father's tightly, shaking it up and down slowly. His eyes grew moist.

"Come home with me for dinner, Brother Rhodes," he said.

Father accepted and I was wild with delight, for Mrs. Brian was little and friendly and laughed a lot, and always had loads and loads of good things to eat.

Mother went around among the women shaking hands. Rude Hamilton edged up to her mysteriously.

"I tell you, Sister, there was a lot of truth in that sermon. If some people I know would forsake the evil of their ways and repent, there wouldn't be storms like the one we have just had."

Mother looked around helplessly, and just then some one came up, and she began shaking hands anew. Mrs. Hamilton turned away disappointedly, but soon brightened, and made her way toward father.

"I am glad you said what you did, Brother Rhodes. There is altogether too much wickedness among our people. If they don't mend their ways I am afraid of what might happen."

"The Lord knows best, Sister. We must leave all to him."

"I know. I know. But sometimes I think we ought to take a hand in it ourselves."

We went home with Mrs. Brian, and after dinner I spent the glorious afternoon out in the fields.

As the summer passed the results of the storm became more apparent. When we went to cut our corn we had to straighten up what few crooked stalks remained and cut them with the cutter. It took us but a day, while it otherwise would have taken a long time. When we husked it out and put it in the crib, it filled only one corner, where it usually filled the whole crib. What we did have was little nubbins such as we usually sorted out for the cow. The fodder was so filled with sand that it was practically worthless. How we could winter a cow and two horses on it was the problem that worried father.

Usually mother put up a lot of canned fruit, berries, apples and the like. She had a big built-in cupboard by the fireplace where she kept it. In ordinary years it was full, but this fall she had but one shelf half filled. She would sometimes look in at it, then look around at us and sigh.

Father had a way about him when he was in the blues of walking the floor and whistling a mournful tune the words of which ran:

"O bury me not on the lone prairie,"
These words came low and mournfully
From the pale lips of a youth that lay
On his dying couch at the close of the day.

The air was low and melancholy and sad, and dragged the words out until the whole scene on the lonely prairie was pictured as one of indescribable longing and desolation. As the early frosts began to turn the leaves, he would walk the floor for hours and whistle this tune until mother would beg him to stop.

As father returned Monday after Monday from his appointments he began to look more harassed and concerned. Usually when we wanted meal and flour all we had to do was to go to the mill and get it, for the people at the appointments would usually bring a grist in for us when they brought their own load to the mill. But they had little to bring this year, and there was none for us. Early in the fall we quit having biscuits for breakfast, and that was the first effect of the storm upon us.

The next came when it was time to get our winter clothes. We got none. Mother made me a pair of pants from an old pair Hen had worn the winter before, made him a pair from one of father's, and father went without his customary new outfit. Margaret went with a made-over, and mother sighed when there was no sateen for her new dress.

My boots had been almost worn out the winter before, and they leaked badly now. Hen had to wear his old ones, too, but he said he was going to school if he had to go barfooted. Hen was going to be a Doctor, and he said he had to have an education.

Our cow and horses got poor and bony, for the corn and fodder had been gone for a long time. All they had to eat now was straw that Hen and I carried on our backs to them from a straw stack a mile and a half away. The horses got so poor that father would start to his appointments earlier on Saturday in order to give them more time to make the trip.

We ate the fruit that mother had put up, before the holidays, and aside from corn meal and a barrel of kraut, there was absolutely nothing in the house to eat. Hen went to school without taking his dinner, for he said he was ashamed to take corn bread and kraut. Margaret and I staid at home.

Day after day father would go out into the woods, old Ponto with him, his long rifle over his shoulder, and tramp all day looking for game. Usually it was quite easy to find, but the hard winter had driven others out to hunt it, and between them it was scarce. It was only the fact that father was a wonderful shot that saved us. As it was he would come in along toward dark with a squirrel or a rabbit or two.

My, those suppers! Hot pone baked brown; squirrel cooked with plenty of hot gravy, and everything warm! Father would take the head and a hind leg as his share, and the rest would be divided up among us! The greatest thing was the gravy. The pone would crumble up, and with the hot gravy over it, I thought it was the best thing that could be possibly desired.

All around over the hills I would track rabbits, and set rabbit boxes where I thought they had holed up for the night. Bright the next morning I would slip out and go over my traps. Sometimes there would be nothing, but usually I would have one somewhere. And rabbit meat, while not as good as squirrel, tasted very good to us that winter.

Then about every week we went out on a 'possum hunt.

Old Ponto could be trusted to find a 'possum if there was one within the radius of our ramblings, and his bark, however far away it might be, was a signal for us to start running and yelling to get to him. Sometimes we could see Mr. 'Possum sitting up in a little tree, and by shaking the tree he would fall out and Ponto would do the rest. But one time, I remember, he had climbed high up in a beech tree, and on sighting him I was sent up to shake him down. I climbed up to the bough on which he was sitting and shook hard. He fell, but caught by his tail to a lower limb. I climbed down to it and shook again, but as he fell he caught to a limb still lower. The third time I climbed carefully down and shook. Ponto's immediate uproar was entirely sufficient to inform me where the 'possum was.

When we would get home with a 'possum, we would skin it carefully. The skin we would pull down over a pointed board and hang up to dry, for a 'possum's skin, properly dried, brought us twenty-five cents. But the 'possum itself would go to the kitchen, and the next day we would have fresh meat for dinner.

But despite all our efforts there were days when there would be neither rabbit nor squirrel. And hunt where we might, there were nights when Ponto's bark would never be heard. And the next day mother's eyes would be red and father's face would be drawn. It did seem to take so much to go around, and when there was so little it just seemed as though we never could get enough.

And then I got sick. It began one night, after I had gone to bed without much supper. I dreamed that I stood on a high hill, and looked down into an abyss so deep that I could see no bottom. For a moment all was dark below, and then it was suddenly illuminated with a light so brilliant that I thought my head would burst with the glare. And suddenly there was a narrow belt stretching from my feet right down into the white depth beneath me. I stepped on the belt, and immediately began to slide at an incredible speed along it. I could look off on either side, into spaces so vast that my mind reeled at thought of them; behind me the incline was so sharp that I realised I could never draw myself up again. I must go down, down, forever down. And then in a twinkling I was at the bottom, and the belt was bearing me upward. Far up, a million miles or more, I saw a great white sphere on which the belt was revolving. Now the incline was so steep that I knew I must clutch the belt to keep from falling into the never-ending spaces on either side, only to realise in a wild terror that there was no place to hold to.

It seemed that I had been on this belt for ages, hurled from one white sphere to another in a glare that fairly burst my eyes, when I felt a terrible pressure on my leg that hurt me. I put down my hand to see what it was, and it rested on father's arm. I opened my eyes.

I was on a pallet by the fire. Father was bending over me, one hand holding tightly to my leg, and the other pressed against my chest. I saw mother walking wildly about the room, and Hen and Margaret with white faces standing looking down at me. I struggled to get free, but father pressed me down again.

"O, daddie, let me up," I implored.

"O, my boy!" and mother sprang toward me, pushing father aside as though he were a straw. She gathered me fiercely into her arms and kissed me over and over again. I was greatly bewildered.

"What is it, mother?" I asked weakly.

"Do you remember anything, honey?" she asked.

Then I remembered, and clutched her tightly in terror. They told me that I had been sick for nearly a week, that

I had cried out, and fought so fiercely that father had to hold me; I found that I was very weak.

Father soon went to bed and slept for a long, long time. Mother never left my side. The second day I remembered I was very hungry.

"Mother, can I have something to eat?" I whispered.

She looked at Hen who had come in but a little while before, and he shook his head. Then she went in the room and got father up. He dressed, and I soon saw him go out with the rifle. Hours later he came back, and, coming over to where I lay, showed me a large grey squirrel.

"See that, Ben? You will soon have all you want to eat."

Margaret had water boiling in the kitchen, and soon she put before me a big bowl of gravy and a piece of pone. I took little bites so it would last longer, and ate on and on. Then I slept.

That night mother went to bed.

The next day she placed a rocker in front of the fire, put a warm comfort in it, and set me down in it. I sat and drowsed and slept. When she had time, she sat and nursed me by the hour; and when father came in he would take me in his arms and nurse me.

He had an old song that he sang to me over and over again. The words were queer, and the tune was queerer still, and very old, but it rested me a lot, the way he sang it:

And another dear blessing Mary had, she had the blessing of three,
To know that her son Jesus could set the poor sinners free.

It went on and on, a verse for every number up to twelve. It was number seven that I liked best, and I had him sing it many times:

And another dear blessing Mary had, she had the blessing of
seven,
To know that her son Jesus could unlock the doors of heaven.

He confided to me that he had learned it from his own mother when he was just a little boy; and he told me all about his boyhood in the great log house at Big Bend.

Day by day I got stronger, for I had plenty of good things to eat. It was only when I was up and around that Hen told me how mother had done without her squirrel in order to give it to me. He declared fiercely that he wished he might get sick, and get all the good things.

But even after I was well, the hard winter was still on. Again I took up with the others the same old struggle.

But one day a letter came for father—and it changed it all.

Chapter 9

HEN had gone for the mail. Even during the summer it came but twice a week, being brought by horseback from Flatwoods, miles and miles away. But during the winter we were lucky to get it at all. For often the carrier would start out, get about half way, and be balked by a flood or a storm. He would then stop and leave the bag at the last house he could reach. Now the people at this house, whoever they might be, were just dying to know what was in this or that package (for the carrier always opened the bag so any one who might ride over could get his mail) and often their curiosity so far got the better of them that the mail never reached its rightful destination. But when it did come through, it would be a red letter day at the store. Father had sent Hen up on this particular day.

He came back with a number of papers, two or three back copies of the Journal and Messenger which Margaret fairly clawed out of his hands, for she was reading a continued story—and a letter. Father held the letter in his hand and looked it over and over. Mother regarded him impatiently.

"Open it, Tommy," she commanded.

He tore it open, and read it. He folded it deliberately, took it by the corner, and flipped his boot with it; opened it, and read it again. Then he handed it to mother without a word. She read it, glanced up quickly, and went over to him.

"O, Tommy, isn't it just splendid!"

"I thought it would come sooner or later," he said proudly.

"O, I know. But now, of all times! O, I am so happy."

She looked it. Mother usually looked happy, but now she just glowed. And within a day or two I knew the reason so well that I could recite it off by heart as glibly as the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed. It was this:

DEAR BROTHER RHODES:

The West Virginia Baptist Association meets this year at Flatwoods, and at a meeting of the Programme Committee held yesterday it was decided, in recognition of your past services to the Kingdom, to have you give the closing address of the Association.

As in past years, this honour will carry with it your expenses to the Association, as well as a free-will offering at the close.

Affectionately your Brother,
A. H. HAMMON.

In three weeks the great Association was to be held. A few days after the letter came, father received a programme. It was the first time he had ever been asked to deliver so important an address, and little else was talked of around our house. Father wandered aimlessly through the woods for hours at a time, and when he returned to the house he would explain each new point to mother. She was excited to death over it, and they would talk over every detail and weigh each word. When the great day came, the two of them went off together on horseback to the railroad. Mother waved back to us from the last bend and I felt very lonely, for they were to be gone for four days.

The time passed somehow, and on the evening of the fourth day we were all wedged up against the window watching the bend in the road. First we saw old Bill in the gloom turn the bend, and next Bird. I could hardly see mother, she looked so small from that distance, but I knew very well she was there, and that she had managed to slip something into the saddle-pockets that I would like.

The horses seemed to move like snails, and when we couldn't stand it any longer we rushed through the door and down to meet them. Father called out a big "Hello" but I made straight for mother. She jumped down out of the saddle and told Hen he could take the horse. We walked home side by side.

Father was in great good spirits, and after taking off the saddle-pockets, told Hen to put up the horses. Hen edged around to mother.

"Mother, tell him not to open the saddle-pockets until I get back," he said hurriedly, in the hope that I would not hear.

"I heard you, smarty."

"Don't care if you did," he answered back.

When he got back father had the saddle-pockets on his knee. He drew out a large poke and handed it to me. It was full of peanuts, and I began forthwith to sample them. He handed Margaret a long limp package, and she flew to the fireplace to open it. It was cloth for a dress, the prettiest dress Margaret had ever had. She began to measure it around her, and stick out her foot to see how far down it would go, and how it looked falling around her. Next he held out a box to Hen. When Hen opened it he looked long and earnestly without a word. Then he caught his breath. It was two linen collars and some ties. Hen had been wearing father's collars, which were much too big for him. Father then drew out a bag of mixed candy which he passed around to all.

"That's all, children," he said, turning the saddle-pocket upside down and shaking it. "But no. Bless me, there must be something in the other side. It feels heavy," and he looked slyly at mother.

"I don't know what it could be," she said seriously.

"Why, here is a bundle. What could it be? Here is a name on it, as I live, honey. Mrs. Anne Rhodes, I do declare."

"You give that here, now sir," mother said, all rosy and nervous, as she snatched the package out of his hands.

"Open it and let's see what it is," father ordered, as though he were greatly perplexed as to what the contents might be.

Mother picked at the cord nervously, eagerly, and at last it gave. She unwrapped the paper hurriedly, and then caught her breath in a sob at what fell out on her lap. It was a dress of pink sateen, all shining and soft and beautiful. Mother caught it up and buried her face in it and flung herself in father's arms.

"You old dear. And you never told me a thing about it. O Tommy, Tommy!" Mother cried, and father's eyes got dim, and he got up and pushed her away from him roughly.

"Get away from here," he laughed. "Go and put it on and we will see how you look."

"Not now, Tommie. I'm not fixed for it."

"Of course you are. We want to see you in it."

She tripped laughing into the bedroom and was gone for a long time. We did not hear her open the door, and the first we knew she was ready was when she spoke from the door.

"Well, how do you like it?"

We turned and saw her. She was standing there slim and straight. The dress fell down around her, and there was an arch roguish look on her face that made her very good to look at. Father reached her in a bound, gathered her up in his arms and brought her up and set her down in front of the fire. O, it was a happy night. We looked at her from every angle. She seemed to be getting more curious all the time. She turned to father.

"Now tell me how much was in the collection, Tommie."

"Indeed I don't know. I had all these things picked out beforehand, and when the service was over I went out and paid for them out of the collection. We came away in such a hurry that I have not counted what was left."

"Tommy, that was extravagant of you. Count it now."

From the saddle-pockets father drew a large cloth bag. It was almost full of money. He poured it out in his lap and counted for a long time. There were pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, half-dollars, dollars and a few bills. He counted and counted, laying each dollar in a little heap by itself. When he finally finished, he seemed almost astonished.

"How much?" mother asked.

"How much would you say?" he answered.

"Twenty dollars?"

"More than that."

"Thirty?"

"More yet."

"Tell me."

"Forty dollars left, after our expenses have been paid, and what I bought paid for."

Forty dollars! It was the most money I had ever seen at once in my life. And forty dollars at Barren Rocks would go so far! Our hard winter was over. It meant shoes and warm clothes and sugar and biscuits!

That night at prayers father prayed a long time. My feet got tired kneeling, and the side that was toward the fire got too hot, and the side farthest away got cold. I thought he never would get through, but I thought it was very nice that he closed it up like he did. He said:

"And we thank thee, O God, that thou hast never forsaken us, but hast always kept us as under the shadow of thy wing."

Chapter 10

NO doubt a cow is a very essential piece of property. I never did like butter, and could not bear sweet milk. I liked fresh buttermilk, but we did not have it very often. For what I got out of it, I would gladly have dispensed with a cow altogether, but we had one, partly, I suppose, because every one else had.

The wildest enthusiasm could not find anything of beauty in our old cow. She was black, coal black all over, and very poor. She had large ears, a boney head, and was knock-kneed.

Cows are usually spoken of as mild-eyed and docile. And what is more, the average cow really seems to be a tame innocent inoffensive creature. But our old black cow was none of these. Her eyes were hard, and the look of them was one of mocking hate. The very way her legs bowed in gave a suggestion of braggart swagger that was extremely offensive. And she had a way of switching her long burr-knobbed tail that was like waving an insolent challenge to all creatures. Her name was Boss.

Now Boss had no regular pasture in which to graze. There were no regular pastures around Barren Rocks. There was no cleared place big enough for one, except the corn fields, and nothing grew on them but weeds. The people let their cows run at large in the woods, and browse. Most of the cows when turned out in the spring would not go very far from home. They would browse on the trees near at hand, and usually manage to be near by when milking time came. But it was here that old Boss showed her originality, if not her downright fiendishness. The farther she got from home the better she seemed satisfied. She really seemed built for long distance travel, for instead of being fat and closely put together like the other cows, she was lean and rangy, and no distance was too great for her to cover.

Father declared to mother one evening that the cow was possessed of a devil, and while I didn't know exactly what he meant it sounded so awful that I was ready to agree with him on the spot. For, you see, it was my job to hunt the cow when she had wandered off, and bring her back for milking time. Since she wore a bell that could be heard for quite a distance, this might not seem at first blush such a difficult undertaking. But she had mile after mile to wander in, and aside from roaming at will, she had an uncanny prescience in certain matters, and seemed to know when I was near in search of her. For she would stand without moving for hours so the bell would not ring. And at such times it was only by the merest accident that I would be within hearing distance when she swung her head around to lick off the flies. But when she did this, the bell clattered for an instant, and gave her away.

I had been told somewhat sternly that when I went to get the cow I went to get the cow, and that I was not to come back without her. Father was like that. When he said a thing there was an air of finality about it that made it seem perfectly hopeless.

There were two places where old Boss usually went when she ran away. One was the Hingle Place. It was about three miles up the river. The path to it led along the river bank, through water weeds, nettles, and the pink crawling vines that rode the weeds down in a tangle. It was this vine that we broke off to find out how long it would be until we should get married. Each tiny tendril running out from the main vine meant a year. Minnie McRand usually broke hers off short, for she was getting well on.

There were snakes along this path, too. Great water moccasins crawled up from the river and stretched out their dark stubby bodies to warm in the sun; and copperheads from the hills crawled down to the water in the dry seasons. Even where there were no snakes to be seen, the bark that fell off the sycamores curled up in long brown strips and looked enough like snakes to make one jump back when he should see it fleetingly through the weeds. Hingle Place itself was a regular nightmare along about dusk. There was a clearing all grown up with high weeds, an old apple tree near the lower end, and in the centre a dilapidated old house, with the roof falling in and the windows simply naked holes. Rude Hamilton told me that two old people had one time lived there; that the old woman had died, and the old man, broken hearted, had stabbed himself and died at her side, and that they had simply lain there without being buried. Every time I went up that way after our old cow, I thought I could see the bones of the old couple bleached and twisted near the old fireplace.

Honnells Gap was the other place where I usually looked for Boss when she was not at the Hingle Place. There was nothing very frightful about Honnells Gap, only it was farther from home than the Hingle Place, and when I had to go there it was usually dark when I got back home.

There was another circumstance that made cow hunting a terrible thing for me. It was said there were mad dogs running about wild. Now if there was one thing I dreaded above all others it was a mad dog. To think of meeting one on some lonely path, and see it come loping toward me, its mouth open and slavering and driveling hectic froth, its eyes hot and feverish, simply made my blood run cold. I had seen a great footprint as of an enormous dog on the top rail of the fence near our house, and I pictured the brute mad and running wildly about over near the Hingle Place.

So one afternoon when I started out to bring old Boss home, it was with no anticipation of a beautiful ramble through the sylvan shades, as father sometimes called the woods in his sermons. It was with a combined image of copperheads, water moccasins, mad dogs and twisted skeletons that I fared forth.

I had not gone very far when I saw Grouchie McRand slouching along in front of me. My heart gave a great leap of relief, for it was sometimes possible to inveigle him to go along with me. But he now seemed more bent on avoiding being seen than anything else. I was mystified, for of all the boys I knew Grouchie was the last one to avoid attention. He usually sought it, and was never more in his element than when the centre of conversation at the store.

" 'Lo, Grouch," I called ingratiatingly when I was near enough. I would have done anything to win him to going with me.

" 'Lo," he muttered shortly.

"Where are you going, Grouch?"

"Nowhere; where you?"

"After the cow. Want to go along?"

"Guess not! Did you hear of the fight between a mad dog and a lynx up next the Hingle Place last night?"

I felt the hot blood running up to my face. I was almost smothered.

"Don't believe it."

"Don't have to. But you will if you go up there and see the blood on the ground where they fit. You will pass right by it on your way up."

"I ain't afraid," I lied stoutly. "Dare you to come along."

"Huh, I got something better'n that to do."

"What?"

"Won't tell."

"You are afraid."

"I'll tell you if you promise not to tell."

"Cross my heart, and hope I may die."

He held out four long black stogies and some matches.

"See that? How would you like to have one?"

I looked all about me quickly to make sure no one was in sight.

"Where did you get 'em?" I asked eagerly.

"Store. Want one?"

For answer I closed my fingers eagerly over one. I had never smoked before. Besides, mother said it was wicked for boys to smoke, and father had said he would punish me severely if he ever heard of my smoking. And he had said it with such a hopeless inevitable air that I expected nothing less than to be skinned alive, just like the pictures said the martyrs had been, if he ever caught me at it. But we were away up the river, and I knew father was at home. And besides, I never wanted anything in my life like I wanted that stogy. I wanted to stick the end of it in my mouth, and light the other end and puff out great clouds of smoke in the most manly and up-to-date fashion I could conceive.

Grouchie took one also, and we carefully bit the ends off. He struck a match on a rock and held it out to my stogy. I drew back.

"You do it first," I suggested.

He looked about him again. Then he started up on the bank.

"We better get out of sight, for fear some one comes along."

Together we climbed up the bank and sat down behind a big rock. Then we both lit our stogies and began. The smoke that I drew into my mouth was stronger and stung more than I had expected, but it was a great thing, even at that. I looked over at Grouchie. He sat humped up, his brows puckered, pulling at his so furiously that it made great hollows in his cheeks.

"Draw hard, Ben. You don't make half the smoke I do," he scoffed.

I was determined not to be outdone. Grouchie and most of the other boys had a fashion of making fun of me at times. I guess it was because I was younger than they were, but I was determined that I would smoke as hard as he did, even if I was younger. Together we pulled, and so steadily that the first two stogies were soon gone. I felt a dull sensation up above my eyes, and would willingly have quit at that, but when Grouchie suggested that we finish the other two, I declared that it would be the greatest fun in the world. We lit them and started in headlong. But we began to slow down before they were more than half finished.

Grouchie laid his up on the side of the rock, and looked at me searchingly. I held mine off at arm's length and looked critically at the business end of it.

"Believe it's gone out," I suggested nervously.

Grouchie got up and straightened himself out. His pants came down a few inches below his knees, and as he stood up they were all wrinkled and puckered about his knees. He placed one hand over against the rock, and leaned on it heavily. Then he sat down and his body relaxed.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine," I answered.

"Stand up," he said.

I stood up. As I unbent, my eyes seemed to dance giddily, and I also leaned over against the rock. This gave me fair support, but there came a vacant feeling at the pit of my stomach that was anything but pleasant. I sat down quickly.

"Feel funny?" Grouchie asked.

"Some," I admitted.

We sat a long time in silence, looking dully about us. Grouchie got up again and looked about him.

"There's some paw-paws," he said suddenly, "all ripe and black. They will fix us up," and he made for the tree.

He brought back three. They were large and black, but they were warm, since they had been lying in the sun. They tasted warm and sickly sweet, but Grouchie declared they were just what we needed, so we finished them bravely and flipped the black seeds away. Then we waited.

Grouchie was the first to speak.

"Believe I'll take a nap," he suggested, and lay down limply on the ground. His face was white, and his eyes rolled about until they looked all white.

I lay down too. There was a turbulent rolling sensation inside that made me glad to stretch out. But stretching did not seem to do much good. We lay there a long time, and finally Grouchie got up and dragged himself weakly down toward the road.

"Guess I'll go home," he announced.

I lay with my hands under my head and watched him out of sight. He looked wretched and forlorn as he went away, and I wondered idly when he would get home.

It was not until the long shadows of the trees began to fall over the river that I realised where I was and what I had been about. I sat up suddenly and looked up toward the Hingle Place. It was already a sombre place, the long evening shadows falling gloomily over it. I got up and started toward it on a dead run. My legs were wabbly and I felt wretchedly weak, but I held myself rigidly on.

I imagined I could see a fat pouchy snake under every weed, and my only safety seemed in running wildly along. When I reached the Hingle Place I was out of breath but determined. I stopped a moment and listened for the cow bell. It was not to be heard. I waited a moment longer, thinking perhaps old Boss would throw her head back to lick off the flies and give herself away, but there was no sound.

In nameless terror I climbed up over the rock cliffs and started toward Honnells Gap. At every cliff I imagined a great bear or lynx or that most nameless horror of all, a catamount. But I reached the Gap safely, and searched in every conceivable spot. But no Boss.

Then I started home. From Honnells Gap I could not go back home by the river path. Bad as was this river path my present route was worse. It lay along the ridge for a mile or more through the woods, then it crossed a deep hollow, and the last part lay down the long steep hill, covered with laurel and ivy, thick in dense undergrowth, and crisscrossed with endless grape vines. It was this part that I dreaded most, although the other was bad enough.

I went more in a run than at a walk. Over fallen trees, round thick clumps of bushes and through the dark woods I went at a furious pace.

I was almost to the last stretch when an ominous sound in front and to the left caused me to halt abruptly. Something was lumbering noisily through the underbrush, emitting low threatening growls at intervals. I knew before I saw it just what it was. But one glimpse of its grisly body made me absolutely sure. It was an enormous grisly bear. The evidence of sight would have been sufficient to confirm this opinion, but when sound was added, all the evidence that could possibly be desired was furnished. I asked for no more, at least.

Filled with a terror that flung all caution or forethought to the winds, my only impulse was to reach home, and to do that one thing in the quickest possible manner. The nearest way home was as the crow would fly, and I took that route. Heedless of the direction of the path, I followed my instinct and made for home the most direct way. My first movement was to jump, and I jumped straight toward home, as though hoping to clear the distance at a single leap. The hill was very steep, and the jump carried me quite a way, but brought me down on top of a laurel bush. I scrambled up and made another flying start for home. And it was in this way—jumping over logs, tearing through the grape vines, falling, rolling, running, that I went home. When I got there I burst into the house almost in hysterics.

No wonder I gave them such a fright, for I was pale as a sheet, my clothes were torn, and I was covered with blood from scratches on my hands and face. But I did not know of this at the time. I simply danced about and waved my hands and shouted that a great grisly bear was after me, full tilt.

There was a general hubbub. Hen looked scared, mother was trying to quiet me, and father looked grave.

"Where did you see it, son?"

"Right at the top of the hill," I cried.

"Are you sure it was a bear?"

"Of course I am," I chattered. "Didn't I see it and hear it growl?" Then I began to cry, partly at helpless anger from not being believed. For I could see that father was inclined to doubt what I said.

"We will get the gun, Henry, and go and see what we can find," he announced more solemnly. "Anne, wash the boy's face and get him ready to go along back with us."

We soon started. Father had reloaded the big rifle, and had put a double charge of powder in it. I bristled with pride, for I knew the great bullet, hurled with such a charge of powder, would crash through the forehead of any bear. I had seen it shot before when it was filled like that. The only thing I feared was that the bear would be gone. I should never get over it if it was, for Hen could never let me forget it, and father would say I had been mistaken. Hen held old Ponto to a leash, to keep him back for an emergency. When we got near the top of the hill I could see him straining, and I knew he smelled something that excited him greatly.

We reached the place where I had first seen it. I pointed out the exact spot to father. He looked around cautiously, then listened. There was no sound. My heart sank within me, but rallied again when I heard a movement in the brush over to our right.

"Hear it?" I asked eagerly.

Ponto growled savagely.

"Something over there," father conceded. "Hen, loose Ponto."

Hen untied the leash. Ponto sprang fearlessly toward the sound. We waited. Soon he came back, panting slightly and looking up at us expectantly.

"Can't understand it," father muttered.

"Maybe he's seen what it is, and has come back afraid of it," was my interpretation.

Then there was a low growl from the woods, and then another and another.

"Hear it?" I encouraged.

Father listened sharply for several minutes, then broke into a loud laugh, and laughed on and on for a long time.

I was furious.

"What you laughing at?" I demanded.

"Come and see your bear, Ben," he answered.

He started off fearlessly in the direction of the sound.

"Better watch out," I cautioned, holding back.

"Come on," he laughed.

As we drew nearer there was another growl, but this time there seemed something familiar about it. My heart sank within me. Father hurried ahead and threw the bushes apart.

"Here's your bear, Ben," he announced.

As I looked I heard Hen laugh scornfully, and wished the earth would open and swallow me up. Standing contentedly before us was one of our own large sandy razor-backs.

Chapter 11

HEN had always been a great student at school. He did not work much harder than several of the other older pupils, but he was always far ahead of them. He just seemed naturally to get along better than they did. Year after year the teachers came down to visit us, and they never failed to say that Hen was a great student; at times they even went so far as to declare that he had a promising future before him.

Outwardly Hen himself did not seem to pay much attention to these remarks. But occasionally when we went up on the hill to drag down fodder for the cow and horses, he became confidential, and told me of all the wonderful things he meant to do when he grew up. On such occasions his eyes smouldered with a strange fire, and he squared his shoulders as if in the presence of some immediate antagonist.

Of late months he and father had got in the habit of taking long walks through the woods. They would start off and wander about aimlessly, but all the while talking in an absorbed manner about something that I was unable to understand. After such a trip, they made many mysterious references to higher education, to the power of knowledge, and to the demands of the new age.

It was all very mysterious to me. I had been the baby in the family for so long that everybody seemed to look upon me as very immature; and I was: Their thinking it made me so.

But one day the whole matter was cleared up by the appearance of a stranger. He was Professor Nottingdale, he told father, and had come in response to a recent communication, whatever that was.

He and father walked out to the river bank, and stood talking for a long time. I did not go out, for I thought father did not want me. When it came time for Professor Nottingdale to leave, he seemed very cordial.

"Yes, sir, I'll see to that. And we will do our best for him."

"I thought as much. Well, well, good-bye. The twentieth, did you say? That's all right. He will be on hand."

I stood and watched Professor Nottingdale cross the river and disappear down the bend. Father came into the house and called mother.

"Well, it is all arranged," he said.

He seemed greatly pleased. But mother did not seem so happy about it.

"Is he to go?" she asked.

"To start in, the twentieth of September. That is a great chance for the boy."

"What is it, mother?" I asked.

"Henry is to go to Sistersville to the Seminary," she said listlessly.

"What is a Seminary?"

"The Calhoun Seminary. It is a school for young men," father said.

"And is Hen to go there?"

"He is, and he starts the twentieth of next month."

So that was it. That was the cause of the long walks; the mysterious references to higher education and the demands of the new age.

"But I thought Hen had finished school," I persisted.

"He just finished the school here. He will go to Calhoun four years, and then on to college, and then still on."

"What will he study about?"

"Henry is going to be a doctor," father said with conviction. It seemed that that fact settled the whole matter in his mind.

Hen came in later, and when father told him the arrangement that had been made, he was jubilant. Mother was the only one that did not seem impressed. She left us soon and went into the little back room off the kitchen where we stored the odds and ends. When she came out to get supper her eyes were very red.

I saw, and instantly realised that something was wrong. I went up to her in a protecting way, as I always did when there was anything the matter. But to my great amazement she pushed me away roughly.

"Do go away, Ben, and let me alone."

I was thunderstruck. Mother had never spoken to me that way before. I felt greatly abused. It was as if my thoughtfulness had been unappreciated. And I went away feeling that I never could forgive her.

At supper she was a little more cheerful, but she did not eat much. I thought to make it plain to her that she had hurt me deeply, and decided to be very cold. But to my chagrin, she did not seem to notice me at all. And she made matters all the worse by bestowing upon Hen completely unnecessary attention. She saw to it that he got all he could eat of everything on the table; and when he was not looking at her, she looked long at him.

During the ensuing weeks, she did little else but fix things for Hen to wear. She made him shirts, knitted warm socks for him, and a pair of heavy gloves. She mended and fixed up all his clothes, and pampered him so indulgently that I was outraged.

Nor was that all. She had father get a big yellow suit case for him. This she took into the little storage room, and, as she finished something for him to wear, took it in and packed it neatly away.

The great day arrived at last. I was to take Hen to Monroe where he should catch the train for Sistersville. Breakfast over (and at breakfast mother pressed Hen so persistently to eat all he wanted that I was completely disgusted) I went out to saddle the horses.

That was another thing. Of late I had had to do all the hard work, while Hen prepared to "enter his classes." It was a fine thing for him, for he sat lazily about and read while I broke my back with the stove wood. But it was not nice for me. I went to mother about it. I hated to go to her, for I had not forgiven her yet for the way she had treated me. But I was willing to swallow my pride if I could get Hen out to help me with the work.

"Mother, make Hen come and help me," I demanded.

"O, run along, Ben. You will not hurt yourself."

I went along, all right, but not in a very happy frame of mind. To make it all the worse, I passed Hen on my way to the wood pile. He was sitting out in the shade, lazily reading a book. As I passed him, he looked up and grinned.

"Run along, son. The wood must be in on time," he said.

How I wished that I were as big as he! If I had been, I should have gone right up to him and had it out with him. But as it was I went on out and chopped the wood.

So when the morning arrived on which he was to leave, I had to go out and saddle the horses while he put on his fine clothes. Father had got him a store suit, and when I came back leading the horses, he was dressed in it. He did look splendid, but I wouldn't have said so for the world—not after the way I had slaved for him.

I was to ride Bird and Hen was to ride Bill. Father came out of the house carrying the suit case. He took it over and strapped it securely to Bill's saddle.

"I guess that will hold you," he said.

Then he went up to Hen. He took his hand and gripped it hard.

"Well, my boy, good luck to you, and God bless you."

Margaret stood on the steps, slim and miserable. Mother was not in sight.

Hen got on old Bill, settled himself in the saddle, and waved a cheerful good-bye. I got on Bird, and looked back over my shoulder. Margaret and father were standing watching us and—at the bedroom window, mother stood. With one hand she held back the curtain; and she was looking after Hen as he trotted away, in a way that made me intensely jealous. As I turned away, she put a handkerchief up to her eyes.

For the moment, I wished that I were going away, never to return; or that I were in some great peril. For the attention that Hen was receiving made me almost hate him.

But as we rode on—across the creeks, up the mountains, along the ridges and through the vast forests, I felt the old resentment breaking down, and in its stead a sense of companionship such as I had never felt for him before. We had grown up together, I thought; we had always played side by side, and he had always fought for me. And as the hours wore away our talk became more intimate, more considerate, more delightful.

It was when I got well along on my return trip the next day that a great loneliness came upon me. I had tied old Bill's halter to the horn of my saddle, so that I would not have to lead him. And when Bird struck up a trot, he lagged behind and the halter sawed across my leg. It was irritation at old Bill's laziness that first made me wish Hen were along. But as the day passed, I wanted some one to talk to. When I passed by the place where we had eaten our lunch the day before, a lump came into my throat.

And when, late in the evening, I reached home, I found a great gloom there. Father sat musing, and mother looked up frequently from her work and sighed. Even Margaret seemed affected. And again the sharp pang of jealousy shot through me. But as the long evening wore on, I missed Hen too, and became silent like the others.

But if Hen's going had changed somewhat my status at home, I was soon to learn to my sorrow that it had made a difference away from home. Hen had been big and hard, and when any of the older boys picked on me, he usually dealt with them in such a summary manner that they were willing to meet any terms he might impose.

But the first time I met with the boys after he went away, I noticed a subtle change. Little was said, but Ed Rainey snatched an apple from me, bit a huge bite out of it, and passed it on. When at last it returned to me, it was little more than the core. I was thunderstruck, and looked about me helplessly. To no one in particular, I cried out,

"Aw, make them give me back my apple."

It was not so much for the literal return of the apple that I cried, as for summary vengeance upon those who had robbed me. But to my amazement, there was no reply save a general laugh. Ed Rainey even called out something about a coward, and the crowd moved on toward the swimming hole.

Arrived there, we speedily undressed and jumped in. Now there was one thing that I did not like in the water. I could swim, all right. All of us could swim from the time we could remember. But if any one should slip up on me and duck me, I would strangle. And it had been generally understood that I was not to be ducked. But no sooner had we got fairly cooled off than Ed Rainey slipped up behind me, put his hand on the top of my head, and pushed down hard. I went away under. When I came up I was strangling and coughing. I swam jerkily to the bank and glared at Ed. He laughed. And every one else laughed. I put on my clothes and went home.

But I couldn't stay at home all the time. And yet whenever I went out it was the same. If we went fishing, some one would break my pole or throw my bait into the water. If we went hunting, all the boys would try to run off from me. And wherever or whatever it was, my life was a nightmare.

Father had been very clear in his teaching. It was wrong to resist. If an enemy hit one cheek, the other was to be turned. And by overcoming evil with good, coals of fire would be poured on the sinner's head. All this was rather mysterious to me. In the first place, Ed Rainey and Floyd Hankerton and Grouchie McRand and Bill Hunter and the rest of them could not be called my enemies. I felt some way that they were really friends. And as to the coals of fire, I agreed most heartily to the method, and admired the ingenuity of the one who had thought it out, but it seemed so remote from realisation that it did not serve as a very tangible hope.

But father had been straightforward about it. No doubt could be entertained as to the meaning he had had in mind.

"If you fight away from home, you will get another whipping when you come back," was exactly what he had said.

But I felt somewhat certain that it was because I did not fight that the boys were taking such liberties with me. "'Fraid," "coward," "won't fight," were the most frequent words I heard from them. But it was real facts that finally brought me to a decision.

We were all up the creek one Sunday afternoon. We had been going along the banks hitting flat stones with others that we picked up, to see how many chubs and horny-heads we could kill, when Grouchie McRand shoved me into the water. I got out quickly, and started for home. But while the others jeered, Grouchie came after me, caught up, and commenced to pound me furiously. He hit me on the head, in the stomach; he scratched my hands and face, and kicked me on the shins. I commenced to howl, and ran with all my might toward home.

I pondered long that night. Why did they always pick on me? Why didn't Grouchie and Ed fight? Why was I the only one they jumped on and bullied? It was a poser, but at last I thought I saw the light. Grouchie did not fight Ed because he was afraid of getting licked. They all fought me because they knew I wouldn't fight. And I drew a conclusion. The only thing for me to do was to fight back, and fight hard. When I thought of what father had said I was halted, but only for a moment. Father was nothing compared to the boys. I would rather take a licking from him than from them.

But I didn't know how to fight. And with that I began a course of education, somewhat deficient because of the absence of paraphernalia, it is true, but entirely rugged and effective as far as it went. I got a bag half filled with bran, and suspended it from the beams of the stable. And I stood by the hour pounding that bag. My arm got tired, my knuckles raw, but I pounded on with a fierce joy and a growing sense of triumph at every savage punch. Then my arm got so it didn't get tired, and my knuckles got hard and rough. Following the prevailing fashion, I let my finger-nails grow long, and practised scratching the bag with them until it was worn thin. At last one fine day I thought my training finished, and bided my time.

It came. We had all gone back on the hill to the persimmon tree, and found that they were not quite ripe yet. We bit into a few, but the task was not a very pleasant one; and we were just turning to go home in disgust when I saw a cunning look flit over Grouchie's face. He went over and whispered to Ed Rainey. Ed grinned and nodded his head.

"Come here, Ben," Grouchie called.

"What you want?"

"Come and see," he said.

I went. When I got up to him, he threw his hand around back of my neck and pulled my head suddenly forward. He stabbed a green persimmon at my mouth. He missed and he stabbed again.

"Eat it," he snarled. "Eat it."

I side-stepped neatly and sprang away from him. He came for me headlong. And as he came I mentally pictured the bran bag in place of his head, and whaled away. In my wildest dreams I had never hoped for anything quite so complete and satisfying. I landed squarely between his eyes, and he reeled back both in absolute surprise and with a howl of pain.

Then I lost my head altogether. Up to this time I had been perfectly calm, acting with the precision I used on my bran bag. But with Grouchie's cry went my composure. I trembled in every limb and began to whimper in a silly maudlin way. But it was not with fright. It was with a kind of miniature berserk rage. Whimpering and shaking, I sprang at my dumbfounded victim and began to claw him, pummel him on the head, and kick him wherever he was exposed. It was all too much like a whirlwind to give him time to recover. He tried a bluff.

"Aw, Ben, I didn't mean nothin'. Quit your hittin' me."

"Say 'nough," I yelled shrilly. "Say 'nough, an' I'll quit."

He made some feeble show of resistance, but I was completely beside myself. I hurled myself on him like a fury, bore him to the ground, and kept up a rain of blows.

"Say 'nough," I demanded.

" 'Nough," he said weakly.

I got up. Bill Hunter whirled me around facing him. His face was flushed and his black eyes snapped.

"Great stuff, Ben. Shake." He stuck out a dirty hand and I shook it. That was a signal for every one to begin talking at once.

"Fine," "never saw anything to beat it," "knew he had it in him if he would only let out," and other like ejaculations fell on my disturbed soul like sweetest melody. I puffed out.

"If he wants any more he knows where to get it," I pronounced savagely, shaking my fist at him.

But he wanted no more. Bill Hunter laid his arm over my shoulder in a friendly fashion, and we started toward home.

"Guess it's time to go home, boys," he said.

Together we walked away. The others followed, and there was in their voices as they addressed me a new note. It was of respect. From that time on I took Hen's old place. It was a place of full fellowship.

Chapter 12

THE biggest event of the year at Barren Rocks was the annual protracted meeting. It usually started a little after Christmas, and lasted anywhere from two to seven weeks, or as long as the seekers continued to come to the altar.

The crowds were enormous. Every family living near the church would arrange to keep company, and they were not disappointed. For from all over the country the people would pour in. From up the river we always had a regular crowd; from down the river they were less reliable, but some one always was on hand. No one around Barren Rocks thought of missing a service; and from far back among the hills the men in their tall caps and limber boots, and the women with their cheerful red faces would come in such numbers that the church would be crowded for standing room.

It was in the big meeting that I liked to hear father preach best. He never failed to warm up, and running from side to side of the pulpit, he would denounce the strongholds of Satan, and implore the sinners to seek salvation while it was yet day. But it was when he got over in Revelation, or took his text from Daniel that he was at his best. It is in Daniel and Revelation that the future is foretold, and pale horses ride out of heaven, and great beasts rise up out of the ground, and plagues are scattered about, and there are wars, and trumpets blown, and finally the Judgment Day. And when father preached from one or the other of these books, I always settled down to a period when I would be alternately frozen with the very horror of the thing, or lifted clean out of myself by an imaginary song of Moses and the Lamb. And how father would run! And how he would hit the pulpit, and finally how the sinners would rush forward to shake his hands and kneel at the altar to be saved. And then some good Brother would start to pray and another to shout and confusion worse confounded would prevail. It surely was the big time of the year!

When father announced one Sunday, that, Providence permitting, the protracted meeting would start at early lamplighting the next Sunday night, there was a general stir.

"Now, brethren, we want to do all we can to make this a great outpouring of grace. I want to ask now, that if there are those in the congregation who would like to be remembered in the prayers of the saints; or if there are any of the household of faith who wish their dear ones remembered, they make their requests publicly known now."

He sat down. There was a great quiet in the room. One man looked at another, and the other looked away quickly, trying not to appear self-conscious. I saw Rude Hamilton from where I sat. Her jaw was set, and I could see her eyes snapping. She stood up.

"The Lord bless Sister Hamilton," father said solemnly. Many others murmured low "Amens."

"I just want to say, Brothers and Sisters, that we can't expect a revival in this church unless there is prayers among the elect. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name there will I be in the midst of them.' Now unless we gather ourselves together we can't expect no divine outpouring. I think one need is more converted church members." She sat down vigorously, and looked about her. Nobody moved.

"Are there others?" father's voice broke in encouragingly.

Then Henry Tolliver stood up. He was clearly nervous, and he looked about him timidly before he began. Every one loved him. He was white haired, and his voice was soft and kind. He was one of father's great friends.

There was a solemn hush, and all eyes turned toward him. He cleared his throat nervously and began, his soft kind voice filling the room like music.

"It is twenty-eight years that I have been living in this way, and in this time I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his seed begging bread. It is a glorious way. But Brothers and Sisters, I have one great sorrow, and when I heard Brother Rhodes announce the meetin' for next Sunday I thought maybe the Lord's time had come at last." He stopped and looked about uncertainly, as if fearful to begin again. "Brothers and Sisters, I have a wayward son. I am not saying who is to blame. We are all sinners, and maybe I have left something undone that I might have done, but, O Brothers, I want you to pray for my son. Pray for him that he may be found before it is too late."

He sat down, and people all over the church began to wipe their eyes. Mother was looking out of the window and the tears were running down her cheeks. There was a moment's silence, and from somewhere back in the church a weak quavering voice was raised in a hymn. Soon the others joined and it was sung to the end.

"Let thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee," and the hymn closed with a lonely quavering sob. And the revival was on.

"There are others who ought to say the same thing," was Rude Hamilton's comment as we went home.

The following Sunday night the church was full, and the air was hot and close. The snow had melted off the boots, and gave a moist odour to it. The saved were occupying seats directly in front of the pulpit, and back near the door a noisy crowd of sinners jostled each other and talked good-naturedly. It was the usual beginning, the curious were out for a thrill; the church workers were in deadly earnest to win some sinner from his peril; and the sinners for the most part took it all in good-natured tolerance, as if perfectly willing to be the objects of general solicitation, since all were bound to have it so.

It was a good week before things got warmed up properly. There had been considerable coldness and indifference among the members of the church, and father was untiring in his insistence that there could be no revival as long as such a condition prevailed. There were exhortations, prayers, and finally the speaking meeting. It was in the speaking meeting that things were usually straightened out. When they would get up to give their experiences, and tell how they had enjoyed the Way, it usually happened that one after another would be stricken by remorse, confess to some secret sin, or ask a Brother for forgiveness, and the meetings would begin to thaw out until real revival fervour prevailed.

It started on Tuesday night of the second week. Sister Gordon got up. She was tall and thin, and her nose had a fashion of twitching up and down when she was excited. On this occasion it twitched more than usual, and her beady black eyes blinked strangely.

"Brothers and Sisters, I don't want to be the cause of holdin' up the work of grace in this meetin'. And as I have set here day after day and seen how cold and dead it is, I have often felt I had ought to git up and make things right about myself. One of us can't talk about another, for we are all about as bad off as any one. But I just know that I ain't been a doin' right the past year. There has been whole months that I ain't spoke to Ellie Hanson nor her family, and I know it ain't right. And I just want you to pray that the Lord will forgive me." She said the last words as she was sitting down, and she felt about confusedly for her handkerchief.

When she had got up Ellie Hanson's face was hard and her eyes were hard also, but as Sister Gordon finished, her face softened, and she stood up quickly.

"I don't want Sister Gordon to take all the blame. I done just as much as she did, and it is all my fault. I been a feelin' bad about it myself all this time. Why should me and Lucy not speak? Here we are neighbours, and had ought to be the best of friends." She said this while going rapidly over toward Sister Gordon. And arriving there, the two women threw their arms about each other and sobbed.

The effect was electrical. From the pulpit father started, "Blest be the tie that binds," in his wavering uncertain way, and looked imploringly at mother to help him through. That was like father. He couldn't be depended upon to carry a tune, but when he got stirred up in a meeting he simply could not help starting some song. But mother usually helped him out. She did on this occasion, and the hymn was finished nicely, although father did get entirely off the tune about midway, and soared up and down in the most random manner.

That was the real beginning of the big meeting, the biggest we ever had at Barren Rocks. Nearly every one confessed to something or other; and by the time the confessing was finished, everybody felt the joy that comes from confessing a fault and getting it out of the system, as father said, and also was cheered by the fact that he had been noble enough to forgive a Brother that had sinned against him. Old enemies that had not spoken in years clasped hands up near the mourner's bench, and amidst shouts of hallelujah and fervent amens the work of grace swept on.

I wouldn't have missed a service for anything in the world. To me there was something terribly gripping in it all. I didn't care so much for what the younger people said and did. Father called them the younger brethren, and urged upon them the need of personal work, but their doings did not make much of an appeal to me. Young Zed Newton would walk boldly back among the unsaved, put his hands on their shoulders, and smilingly talk to them about their duty to live a better life. And Jane Ellanger would sometimes shut her mouth tightly and walk back nervously, as though she were walking blindfolded across a board into she knew not what. She always looked as if she doubted whether she would ever come back, but was determined to do her duty whether she did or not.

These younger people did not make much of an impression upon me. I often thought young Zed was putting on a lot; and Rude Hamilton said Jane was working simply to impress Hen. I didn't pay much attention to that, but for other reasons I remained unimpressed.

It was when the old ones got worked up that I was pleased. The older the better; and if they had white hair and beard they were all the more impressive. I thought old Uncle Henry Tapps best of all. He was not my Uncle. He was not any relation at all. But father called him old Uncle Henry, and I thought the name suited him very well. He was very, very old. His hair was white as snow, and grew away down around his shoulders. He had a long white beard also, and his voice, while somewhat shrill, was nevertheless very penetrating. I did think it would have been much better if he could have roared a little in a great deep voice. But as it was, he did it very well.

When he got up to give in his testimony, he would jerk out his words and his beard would bob up and down as he opened and shut his mouth. He would shake his head, and his long hair would rise and fall about his shoulders. And every little bit he would wave his arms and hold them out imploringly while beseeching sinners to repent and turn from the error of their ways. At such times he was truly magnificent.

But when he prayed he was at his best. He would kneel down, but he did not bend over forward like most of the men did. He would kind of sit back on his heels, throw back his head, and as he prayed, wave back and to. When he said Father, he pronounced it in a funny way, like we pronounced the first part of waver, and as he got warmed up to it he would draw one foot up from under him and place it in a different position. How he did it I never could tell, although I got up near him many times to watch, and at home I would practise it faithfully but never succeeded in doing it. But in some way he would bring his heel up and down on the floor until it sounded just like a woodpecker driving a rapid fire against a dead limb. It was at these times that I wished the meetings would last for ever. For with his heel beating a rapid tatoo upon the floor, his hair and beard waving and his arms pawing wildly through the air, he presented the most engrossing spectacle I had ever seen.

Sometimes during a lull in the meeting, father would call on him to pray. If I happened to be on the other side of the church from him at the time I would hurry over and get as near as I could. Sitting there, I would watch in a kind of awed wonder, and when he was through I would experience a pang of genuine regret.

One crowded night the church was full, but there was a difference. Abel Tolliver was there. He was Brother Tolliver's wayward son. He had not been to church before during the meeting. He did not usually attend church, and this was one reason he was such a great sinner. There had been many prayers since the meeting started that the Lord would bring him out to the services. And when the workers saw him there on this night there were many significant nods exchanged between them. It was looked upon as an answer to prayer, and I heard one man whisper to another that already Abel looked like he was under strong conviction.

During the sermon father made reference to those who were bringing the grey hairs of their fathers with sorrow to the grave, and called upon all such to repent while it was yet day. And when he gave the invitation, there were twenty-four who crowded forward and knelt at the mourner's bench. But Abel was not with them. Personal worker after personal worker went back and talked with him. He listened to all with a smile, and to one and all shook his head negatively. There was no moving him.

Many thought that if he did not come forward tonight he would never come. It was even rumoured that he had already sinned away his day of grace. And it was not long until it could be acutely felt that the whole effort of the service centred around him. And then, after several of the seekers had sprung up from the altar with shouts of joy, there was a sudden lull. It was as if all minds were focused on Abel Tolliver.

Father called upon Uncle Henry Tapps to lead in prayer. It was quite the most exciting moment in my life. I could feel a tingling at the roots of my hair. My mouth got dry, and I swallowed desperately. Then edging my way over as near Uncle Henry as I could, I knelt down in strained expectancy. As usual he began by leaning back on his heels. Then he implored the Fayther for mercy upon all sinners. And after waving his arms about in the wildest manner, he drew up his knee and began to beat on the hollow floor with his heel. There were cries of "Amen," "Lord Grant," "Yea, Lord," and "That's right, that's right," from all over the house.

And then something that had never occurred before happened. Old Uncle Henry, still sitting on his heels, began to hop back through the aisle of the church. Back he went, nearer and nearer to Abel Tolliver, until he got to the seat in the end of which Abel sat, looking interestedly through his fingers at what was going on. Here he stopped, and facing the pulpit, continued to pray. With his left hand he still pawed the air, but with his right he gripped Abel. And then he prayed for Abel's salvation.

It was too much. At first he tried to smile it off. Then he attempted to withdraw himself from old Uncle Henry's grip. Failing in this, he looked frightened, and then tremendously moved. He gulped; he bent his head down behind the seat in front of him; at last he straightened up, squared his shoulders, arose, and walked resolutely down the aisle toward the mourner's bench. He got there and fell down on his face praying for mercy.

After supper that evening, before we had started to church, mother remarked that she felt very tired. After a little when she got up to go and change her dress for the service, father said it was no use to take the trouble to put on a different dress.

"You look all right just as you are, honey," he said.

"O, I don't feel as though I ought to go looking like this," and she surveyed herself with many misgivings.

"Sure, now, that is just all right," father continued, convinced.

"It would save a lot of trouble," mother conceded, and looked around inquiringly.

"That's what it would. You sit down and rest till time to start."

With one last troubled look she sat down.

"I'll sit down near the stove and not move, and no one will notice me," she decided hopefully, and settled back in her chair.

True to her resolution, she sat down back of the stove, where it was hard for her to be seen. I sat with her for some time, but when things began to loosen up I simply had to get out and keep my eyes open so as not to miss anything. But mother had remained in the shadow.

I saw her next when Abel Tolliver fell down at the mourner's bench. She raised up from her seat, looked over toward him as though she could not believe her eyes, and gave one tremendous shout.

"It is an answer to prayer," she shouted, and eyes aglow and face flushed, she moved about shaking hands with all she met until she was completely exhausted. When she finally sat down it was not in the obscure seat by the stove, but up in the pulpit with father. And she sat there where all could see, and never once thought of her dress, as she afterwards remarked in the greatest chagrin.

Abel Tolliver was saved, and nothing would do Uncle Henry but we should all go home with him and stay until the following day.

It was during the great ingathering that followed that father preached his never-to-be-forgotten sermon on the Last Day. "But go thou thy way till the end be; for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days." That was the text; and with both Burnsides drawing noisily and the room filled with the moist odour of snow from the wet floor, he preached it to a record congregation. From end to end of the pulpit he ran; he knocked the desk with his clenched fists. He pictured the evils of the present world, gave a horrible picture of sinners cowering before the great white throne, and closed with a terrible picture of them staggering away, muttering, "Lost, lost, lost through all eternity."

When he finished he gave the invitation, "perhaps the last that will ever come to some of us," and there was a veritable stampede to the altar.

That night Naomi Alleau and Esther Olliver were saved. They were both great dancers, and constant agitation for a dance hall, and their going about over the country to dances wherever they were held, had given them a very black reputation. The church was bitterly opposed to dancing, and because of this they had seemed to flout their iniquity in the very face of the sanctuary.

But they came to the altar together, and were soon up and shouting all over the church. They undulated nimbly over the floor, dodged in and out among the crowd like nymphs, and were to be heard first in one place, then in another, shouting and praising God.

Rude Hamilton edged up to mother.

"You could tell they danced. I do believe they are just putting on airs, that's what I think," and she snapped her mouth shut viciously.

"O Sister, you should never say things like that," mother said, horrified.

"I know it sounds like I doubt divine grace, but you just wait and see," and she walked quickly away, muttering.

It was a day or two after that that I began to get terribly worked up. Father had preached on sinning away the day of grace, and had told of men who had passed beyond a fatal dead-line, where the spirit no more should strive with them. I thought it was horrible. And there began to weigh upon me the secret and terrible conviction that I was lost; that I had sinned away my day of grace; and that hell had enlarged herself to swallow me up.

The more I thought the more positive I became that such was the awful fact. I prayed feverishly, but seemed unmoved, and father had said that this stolidity in the face of spiritual truths was one of the surest signs. A great gloom encompassed me. I wished desperately that I had never been born, for then I could not have been lost. But hopeless as I knew the case to be, I resolved to present myself at the mourner's bench at the next opportunity so as to leave nothing undone that I should do. There always seemed to be that terrible chance of having left undone something, or of having chanced to do something else.

Consequently when, the next night, father gave the invitation, I was on hand. It had cost a mighty effort, for I shrank from the altar as from a plague, but I nerved myself for the ordeal. Trembling in every limb, I set my teeth and went up and knelt down.

Contrary to what I had expected, no one seemed to take any notice of me. And my first emotion was one of resentment that these people who seemed to be so eager for the lost to come forward should neglect to pay adequate attention to me. I knelt there feeling that they were putting on much of their eagerness, and were not at all what they wanted to appear, when I felt a tug at my elbow.

"What are you doing, son?"

It was father's voice, and it did not have in it the melting desire for helpfulness that I felt my soul demanded. It was matter-of-fact.

"I am lost," I said resentfully.

"You are what?"

"Lost. I have sinned away my day of grace."

"O no, you have not. Come up here in the pulpit with me."

I felt that my case had been dismissed far too lightly, but I had always liked to sit with father in the pulpit. It was a point of great advantage, for from it everything that happened in the church could be easily observed. So feeling that I was lost anyhow, and that to tarry at the altar would be worse than useless, I skipped up into the pulpit and began to look around.

Chapter 13

SEVENTY-FOUR was the total of the great ingathering that following the protracted meeting. The number represented all ages, from little Tim Rainey up to old Harrison Applebee. And the same two might be used as samples of the wealth of the new converts, for while Tim's folks were poor as church mice, old Harrison Applebee was rich.

After they had all presented themselves for membership in the church one Sunday morning, the important question of Baptism came up. Of course there was no discussion as to the method to be employed. There was but one method where father was concerned, and that was by immersion. He called any other form of baptism a sacrilege. So all that was to be settled was the time and place.

It was agreed to have the ceremony take place in a big hole down in Little Creek, where the creek made a sharp turn around a giant boulder, and the water was deep. There was also a good sloping bank on one side, and father always looked out for things like that.

As to the time, there was a bitter disagreement. Father said it made no difference whatever to him, and he would leave it entirely with the candidates. Rude Hamilton, although she was not to be baptised, since she was a member of long standing and had been baptised long ago, nevertheless was assuming a rather important part in the arrangements. She said that the sacrament ought to be carried through at once.

"If we have been converted, the quicker we are baptised, which is simply an outward and physical symbol of an inward and spiritual act, the better it looks for our faith," was the way she put it.

I could see that there was at least a considerable opinion in many quarters that she was too severe.

"I have been converted, all right," old Harrison Applebee said, in his rugged forehanded way, "but that crick is cold at this time of year, and don't you forgit it."

Mrs. Hamilton sniffed.

"Cold or no cold, if you have faith it won't hurt you."

"That may be, but again it may not be. I don't allow faith would help my rheumatism much if I got in that crick and contraried 'er some."

The situation was getting ticklish. Brother Applebee had been converted, all right. He had declared as much with stubborn conviction. But he had bossed people around for so long that it was hard for him to get the Christian attitude of humility. He didn't just take to the idea of letting Rude Hamilton boss him around.

On the other hand, Rude thought that the fact that she had been for long of the household of faith ought to count for something. It gave her opinions a weight, a prestige, over the opinions of one who had been for many years an unbeliever.

But father saved the situation. He was good at saving situations. Mother often called him Buckwheat, for she said he was like a buckwheat seed: He could fit into any corner. He fit this corner exactly. He made his way over toward Brother Applebee, and held up his hand for attention.

"Perhaps, brethren, we had better put it to a vote," he began mildly. "We can either have the baptism next Sunday, or put it off until the weather breaks up in the spring. All who favour putting it off, please lift the right hand."

Nearly every hand went up.

"It is so ordered. I will announce the date later."

Brother Applebee looked over at Rude Hamilton with a triumphant smile; while she backed away with the air of one having done all she could to prevent a disgrace, but now that it had come in spite of her, people would have to take the consequences. She had delivered her soul. She went up to mother.

"If I said what I thought, Sister Rhodes, it would be that a lot of them as has joined the church don't have the faith of a grain of mustard seed."

"What do you mean?" mother asked.

"They will be backslid."

"O, I don't know."

"You jest wait and see."

Esther Olliver and Naomi Alleau were great dancers. They never missed a dance, if they could possibly get to it. Their one lament was that there was no pavilion at Barren Rocks. Other towns, they declared, had pavilions, and Barren Rocks had none. And such a pavilion was an essential to any up-to-date town.

Their duty, therefore, was clear. They must collect funds for the erection of a suitable dancing pavilion. They undertook the task the fall before the protracted meeting. And they were very successful. When they first began their task, father smiled and said they could never get the money. He said he knew what they had undertaken better than they did. But he evidently had overlooked something, for it was not long until they announced that they had enough to put up the pavilion.

The church was greatly exercised over this announcement. Father did not say much, but he virtually agreed with Rude Hamilton when she said that Satan was in the project.

The pavilion was to have been erected at once, but winter set in, and the work was put off until spring. And then—Esther and Naomi were converted at the big meeting. Father was jubilant; mother was silent; and Rude Hamilton pessimistic. Of course no one could belong to the church and have anything to do with dancing. But the question was: Would Esther and Naomi cling to the church and give up dancing; or would they return to their old habits and forsake the church? Would they remain faithful, or backslide?

They themselves were very positive in their statements. They were resolved to forsake their sins and to cleave unto righteousness. The old garment of the flesh, they had put aside; and had put on the new robe of salvation. They even backed Rude Hamilton up in her effort to have the baptismal service in dead winter, for so great was their faith, and so eager were they to cut free from the old life, that they did not want to wait for the crowning sacrament until spring.

No one shouted during the big meeting like they did. They got the thing down to a fine art, and it was really a treat to see them thread their way through the crowds, shouting hosannas. And no convert made more inclusive professions than they made. For them the work of grace had been complete; they were saved to the uttermost.

Consequently, when some one sounded them on their future attitude toward the pavilion, they were vehement. No dancing pavilion should be built in Barren Rocks. Nay, they would strike a match to the lumber that had been hauled to the site before they would suffer it to be used for such a purpose. For had they not forsaken the world and the flesh and the devil?

But despite these sweeping avowals, there were those who doubted the outcome. Rude Hamilton was openly derisive. She hooted at the bare mention of it, stoutly claiming that it were an utter impossibility for the leopard to change his spots. And many others were sceptical. Would it be the church, or the dance? That was the question.

When they had declared that the pavilion should not be built, they had reckoned without the consent of several who had been connected with the enterprise, and who had not been converted. Ash Hayes, for example, was a partner in the enterprise, and he declared that the pavilion would go up as soon as the weather broke in the spring. Others who had been interested said the same thing. It looked as if it would go up, even without the support of Esther and Naomi.

"And you just see, Sister Rhodes, if them two don't join in when it gets up," Rude prophesied.

"O, I don't know."

"Wait and see," and she shook her head wisely.

Sure enough Ash Hayes and a few others started work on the pavilion as soon as the weather broke up in March. I was more interested in the pavilion itself than in Esther and Naomi, and I hung about most of the time. It was to be a big smooth floor, covered, but with the sides left open. I had never seen a dance on a pavilion, but I secretly resolved that I would be on hand for the first one on the new floor.

Ash Hayes and I got to be great friends while the pavilion was being built. He was heavy and strong, and I marvelled at the beams he could lift. There was also an atmosphere of romance about him that gave me many a thrill. He had spent seven years in the penitentiary, and for that reason I looked upon him as a hero. He walked like a soldier, and he often stopped work to teach me to march.

I was surprised to find him so friendly. Father had declared that he was an enemy of the light, and that all his works were works of darkness. I had expected to find him an evil, terrible creature, and for many days I did not have the courage to go near him. But as I kept seeing him every day, I got to be less afraid, and finally we got well acquainted. I came to think that father must have been mistaken when he said that Ash was so wicked.

Father announced that the date set for the baptising was Sunday the seventeenth of May. It was to be a great day. Services were to be held in the church in the forenoon; dinner served on the ground; and in the afternoon we were to go down to the big hole in Little Creek for the baptising.

I loved to see people baptised. Father walking out in his shirt sleeves and sounding the bottom with a pole; the "candidates" ranged up on the bank in solemn rank; and everywhere, on both sides of the creek, in trees around the hole and perched up on the rocks, the spectators! And it never failed to happen that some one got happy and began to shout. Then would ensue a great outpouring of grace, when all believers were edified. O, it was a sight well worth seeing.

We made great preparations for the seventeenth. Mother made Margaret a new dress to wear; father pressed his longest Prince Albert; even Hen was to come home early from the Seminary in order to be on hand. And with every day the excitement increased.

It so happened that the very day selected for the baptising was selected by Ash Hayes for the opening dance in the new pavilion. Father was greatly troubled that such a thing had been done. Mother was more indignant than she usually allowed herself to get. While Rude Hamilton looked upon it as the first step in a series that she had predicted from the beginning.

"I tell you, it is the work of the devil," she declared. "And when the day comes, where will Esther Olliver and Naomi Alleau be then? Will they be for us or against us? Will they be up there getting baptised, or down in that bottom? I know."

I wasn't so much interested in that aspect of the matter, although so much had been said that I was curious as to the outcome. Secretly I thought Esther and Naomi would stick to the church. But I did not worry about it, one way or the other.

What provoked me was that both events came on the same day. I did not want to miss the baptising. But I was bound to see the dance. Both came on the same afternoon, and I was troubled.

I finally decided to stay away from the baptising to see the dance. I had seen people baptised before, but had never seen a dance. Therefore, the decision.

My plan was to slip down by the river bank just before time to start to church; let them go off without me; and then roam at will over around the pavilion. True, father had forbidden me to go near it. He called it the gateway of Sodom, and declared that no child of his should go near. But I counted on his being too preoccupied to think of me; and in his preoccupation lay my safety.

The momentous day dawned warm and beautiful. I took care not to attract father's attention in the morning. And just before it was time to start to church I slipped down under the river bank to wait until he was gone. But, fateful sound! I heard his voice.

"O Ben! Where are you? It's time to start, son."

I climbed up. He was standing in the yard, all dressed and ready.

"I'll be there," I evaded, hoping against hope for some loophole.

"You come on now, son, and go with us."

I went. And after the service was over and the baskets had been made to disgorge their wonderful contents, I was exceedingly glad I had come along. There was plenty of cold fried chicken, and that was very dear to me.

When we had finished dinner, we started off for the deep hole. There were ever so many people out. They had come from all over the country, and not a home for miles around but was represented. They walked, they rode horses and mules, and one man had brought his family in a rickety old wagon pulled by a yoke of oxen!

When we reached the big hole there was a scramble for vantage points. There was a great rock on the western side of the creek, whose sides sloped gradually up to a high sharp peak. Men and boys lined the sides of this rock until it looked like a solid wedge of human beings; and it was my great good luck to scale up to the highest pinnacle, where I sat the topmost one of all. From this point of vantage I could command a complete view of the whole scene.

I looked down into the deep hole below me; saw the blue water, and, far down on the bottom in the deepest place, a drift of leaves. I hoped father would keep out of those leaves, for they were awful places for leeches. People were crowded on both banks, and many of the boys had climbed up the sycamores that grew not far away. Mother stood down near the water in a little space that had been reserved for her. She was to lead the singing. And behind her, ranged in three long ranks, were the candidates for baptism. Some were very solemn; others were clearly frightened; while a few were undoubtedly conscious of the important part they were to play in the programme of the hour.

And hemming us in on three sides were the quiet and beautiful hills.

At a signal from father, every voice was hushed. He began the service with prayer. Then he nodded to mother, and she began the song. It was "Abide with Me." She carried the first two lines alone, her voice lifting like the plaintive cry of the turtledove.

Abide with me! Fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens—Lord, with me abide!

But as she started in on the next line, father joined in. And then Margaret, and others, more and more, until all who had come, whether religious or otherwise, had joined in.

Old Uncle Henry Tapps, well over to one side, joined his quavering voice with the others; Harrison Applebee sang in a deep bass; and somebody from a near-by sycamore joined in with a beautiful tenor. O, it was wonderful. Echo cliff was near there, ruined and red in the sun, and it took up the tune and flung it back to us.

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee,
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!

And after we had finished, like an unseen choir from the spirit world, Echo cliff flung the music back to us.

And then came one of the most breathless moments of all. Somebody handed father a long stick. He took it and measured it with his hands. Then he began to wade slowly out into the water, feeling the bottom with the stick as he went. Very slowly, with measured step, thumping the bottom with the stick, he waded out until the water came up to his waist. He circled about, still exploring the bottom, and finally went back to the bank, his trousers clinging to his legs.

Four candidates in the front rank were standing a little apart, hand in hand. Father went up to the one on the right and took his arm. Slowly he led them out into the water—out until it came up to his waist again, and then they stopped.

He put his arm around the waist of the man he had led, gripped the hands that he had folded on his breast, looked dreamily off into the heavens and pronounced the old and terrible formula. Then he baptised him.

This same thing he did with the other three, and led them back to the bank. Four others he led out, baptised and led back again. And four more, and still more.

The tension tightened. I could feel it in the air. There would be an outburst sooner or later. I felt it. Little shivers ran up my back.

From the outskirts of the crowd there was a broken cry. There was a rapid movement, as of some one forcing his way desperately through the throng. All eyes were turned in the direction of the commotion.

Thomas Hamilton forced his way through the crowd near the bank. He was barefooted and disheveled. He fell on the sand at father's feet.

"O brother, I am a sinner saved by grace. I have resisted the spirit these many years. But I have yielded. Baptise me with the others."

He was Rude Hamilton's husband, and he had been a great sinner. He went down the river every few weeks, where, nobody knew, but he always came home drunk, and abused Rude cruelly. When she first saw him come out of the crowd she looked amazed. But as he spoke the wonderful words her face softened. Quickly she elbowed her way over to him, and fell down by his side.

"O Tommy, Tommy!" she sobbed. "How I have prayed to see this day."

She flung her arms about him and sobbed wildly.

Then mother started a hymn:

Blow ye the trumpet, blow! With gladly solemn sound,
Let all the nations know, to earth's remotest bounds,
The year of jubilee has come, the year of jubilee has come,
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home!

With wild enthusiasm the whole throng joined in, and the chorus was flung to the hills, and by the echoes taken up and flung back again. The baptismal outpouring that I had sensed in the air had come at last.

When the service was over, Rude Hamilton, with shining eyes, walked home with Thomas. It was not until I saw them going happily down the bottom that I thought of Rude's baleful prophecy—and stopped short.

Esther and Naomi had not been present.

Leaving the others behind, I made for home as hard as I could run. When I turned the bend in the creek and came in sight of the new pavilion, I was met by a medley of sounds. Ribald laughter, high pitched voices, mingled with the tang of the banjo and the swift music of the fiddle. Back and to over the new floor the dancers swayed, and in the swaying throng—Esther and Naomi.

Rude had been right.

I was not sure whether father looked angry or haggard when I told him that evening. For the crowd had dispersed before he reached the pavilion on his way from the baptismal service. But I do know that his lips sagged when he heard it, and there were weary lines around his eyes.

Before the supper dishes had been cleared away, Rude came over. She looked happier than usual, but she still had that wise confirmatory look about her.

"Just thought I'd drop in a minute," she explained.

"Glad you came over. O, I'm so glad," mother said.

"I thought he would see the light some time," and she nodded sagely. "It's an answer to prayer." Then after a moment, "I tell you, Brother Rhodes, baptism is a very important thing—that is, by immersion."

"Yes, it is," father answered. Rather cautiously, I thought.

"And there are some as are just as well off without it, too."

"Yes, I suppose so," wearily.

"I guess you heard?"

"What?"

"They was at the dance."

"Yes, I heard."

I could see she wanted to enter more fully into details, but father was looking out of the window, and mother sat looking into her lap. She got up awkwardly.

"Well, I guess I better git back."

Chapter 14

THE wonderful success of the big meeting had increased father's popularity enormously. There never had been such a meeting in all Braxton county. And a few of father's best members were proud to think that it had been in the Baptist church, for some of the other churches sprinkled their converts, and of course such a procedure was erroneous to an extreme degree.

And the people said there never had been such preaching in all that part of the country. Father had responded to the occasion even more capably than was usual with him. And I thought I never would forget the sermon from Daniel. I still thought he had been magnificent in that sermon, especially when he had pounded the pulpit with his clenched fists. The running had appealed to me, and the way he roared was good; but that beating the pulpit was the best of all.

I knew the members were feeling mightily pleased, but it was some time before I learned just what they were planning to do. I heard about it up at the store, and had to promise that I would not tell a soul about it. They were going to have a pound party for us.

Now the pound party was a custom to which I agreed with all my heart. When it was even a remote possibility, I was stirred by thoughts of mysterious packages containing many unknown articles, any one of which might be anything from a package of raisins to an overcoat.

For pound parties were like that. Each one that came was supposed to bring a package weighing not less than a pound—hence the name of the custom. And since there was absolute freedom in the selection of articles, the result was more than likely to be a variety that offered boundless occasion for speculation.

It was an awful strain on me to keep the promise I had made not to tell any one about this pound party. I really did not have to make the promise, and I wished devoutly many times that I had not. Even as it was I am afraid mother surmised it, really, although she did not say so in so many words.

But I told her that I knew of something that was going to happen, and when she asked me what it was I vowed that I would not tell under any circumstances. I am not positively sure that she guessed it, but from the very complete going over the house got that day, and from the immaculate condition in which she kept it from that time on, I feared I had been just a little indiscreet.

As for father, I never could tell just what he knew and what he was letting on. He had an uncanny way of finding out things, but he also had a way of keeping still about them. One year, I remember, when they gave a pound party for us, I was certain he knew about it for a long time before the night set. I had slipped into the kitchen and heard him telling mother all about it.

But when the people arrived and began to carry on, and act as if they were going to do goodness knew what, he pretended to be greatly taken aback. He laughed and stamped about and scratched his head as if he had been caught entirely unawares and unprepared.

So I really did not know whether he had heard about it or not. But mother—she did not let an afternoon go by that she did not set the house in order. Father often said that we should never let a day go by without getting everything ready so that if the end of the world should come during the night we would be ready for the Judgment. That was about the way mother fixed up the house. She had everything ready.

It was very still and hot when the evening came. Mother and Margaret finished the supper dishes and came into the living room. We had not lit the lamp, for we thought it might be a little cooler without it. It was hardly dark enough for it, anyway, for in the summer the twilight was long.

Father was sitting over by the window, looking off up the river, and whistling some old tune. He looked as though he might be meditating upon some very difficult problem, like the Trinity, for the Trinity troubled father quite a little. He could not seem to get it straightened out in his own mind. I thought he might be working on it this evening, he looked so preoccupied.

I went over near him and looked him over, although I let on I was looking up the bottom. And would you believe it? He was all dressed up. Not with his Prince Albert, of course. But he had shaved, and his shoes were polished. We polished our shoes by turning up a stove lid and using the soot on it for polish; and I remembered that he had been working in the kitchen that afternoon.

Yes, sir, he knew they were coming. He knew it as well as I did. And I just went back over to the reading table and waited to see how he would act when the people really came.

When the first sounds were heard outside he looked up, listening intently. And when Rude Hamilton opened the door and walked in, he nodded to her as if welcoming her for a quiet evening.

She came in first. She wore her blue calico dress and looked long and lean as she entered. Her face was pleasant, pleasanter than usual, but as she took a step or two inside she jerked her head from side to side quickly, and there was a searching, ferret-like look in her black eyes as she took in every detail of the room. Then she spoke.

"Well, Brother Rhodes, we are here."

Father looked genuinely surprised. And as one after another filed into the room, he looked even more perplexed.

"Well, I declare, if there isn't Brother Tolliver, and you, Brother Ellanger, and Brother McRand. Well, well. What——"

"Just a little party, Brother," some one said.

Then father seemed to comprehend, and broke into a merry laugh.

"A little party? Well, upon my word!"

O, he was clever about it!

As each one came in, there was a sly trip over to the bed, and a great mound of packages soon appeared. To this I soon directed my whole attention. I was a little curious to see the people, but I was far more curious to see the packages. I knew I could not open a single one until every one was gone. But at least I could look at them and try to guess what was in them.

I knew at a glance that the long package on top was coffee. I was sorry, too, for coffee is such a commonplace thing. But a little package out to one side offered greater possibilities. It really looked mysterious. It might be soda, of course. It might be soup beans. And then—it might be brown sugar. I hoped devoutly it was. For brown sugar was just about as good as real candy, especially if it had big lumps in it. And even if it did not, I knew it was a comparatively easy matter to reach into the poke and so grapple for it that my fingers would bring out a fair sized pyramid of it.

I could not resist the temptation to lean over and feel the poke, for if it was not brown sugar I did not want to go on thinking it might be and then be disappointed. While if it was, I wanted to know it sure.

But mother hurried over to me.

"Ben, you come away from there," she whispered scandalised.

And as if afraid that I might not execute the command quickly enough, she got me firmly by the hand and led me away. And the only thing I could do from that on was to walk aimlessly about and speculate in my own mind. I thought the time never would come for them to go.

When they had been there hours and hours, Brother Tolliver got up. He smiled about him, and began to speak. I always thought he was nice when he spoke. His voice was so soft.

"Brother Rhodes, you have done us great service. You have staid up here and worked among us when you might have gone out into the world and done wonderful things. We can't do much, for we are kind of poor. But we want to do what we can. This little package," and he held up a little square package that immediately fired my imagination, "is not worth much in money. But it comes as a little token, and maybe it might please ye."

He handed it over, and father unwrapped it. He drew out a big silver watch. There was a silver chain attached, and on it the watch key was hung. Father looked long at it, and then got up as if to speak, but Brother Tolliver motioned him to sit back down. He began again.

"And we can't forget Sister Rhodes. We all think a lot of Sister Rhodes, and we want to give her this."

He gave her a big, heavy package. It was a big pair of white woollen blankets, so I was not at all interested in it. But I did want to see the watch. Maybe father would give me his old one!

They staid on for some time after that, and I began to get impatient again. Would they never go home? I went over in the direction of the bed again, but mother's eye was on me, and I dared not go very close.

At last they did go, all with some particular word to say. I could see that father was in high spirits; and mother was too, only she looked as if she wanted to cry more than anything else.

When they were gone, I turned impatiently back into the room. Rude Hamilton was standing in the centre of the room. She seemed on the point of going, yet hesitated. She spoke to mother.

"Of course I think they are all right," she said, in a way that made it plain that there was, nevertheless, plenty of room for improvement. "But I do think people sometimes take advantage of them."

"O, I think it is beautiful," mother said.

"Yes, I suppose so. But it's not so beautiful when some one that could bring more slips in something they want to get rid of."

"O, I don't think they do that."

"That's just because you don't know 'em like I do. Now take that pile there. I wonder what's in it?"

She went over toward it hopefully.

"I'm sure it's just full of nice things," mother said.

"I wonder now," and she looked at the bed.

"I know it."

She turned to father.

"Well, I guess I better go."

"Don't hurry off, Sister," he said cordially.

"Guess I ain't been. Funny package, that," and she went over toward the bed again and glanced at a long package.

"Yes, we never can tell what is in them until we open them. I just love to go through them."

"Must be right smart interesting."

"Very interesting," father said emphatically.

"I suppose so?" and she lingered.

I thought she never would go, and I wished father would quit being so cordial. Maybe she might go sooner if he did. But he seemed in no hurry, and talked on and on.

Then there was a silence, and she went back to mother.

"Well, I must go, Sister Rhodes. I hope you can use the things as was fetched."

"O we can, all right. Don't hurry off, though."

"Guess I must go," patiently.

She backed slowly toward the door, stood for an instant looking at us, cast a last glance over the bed, and went out.

. . . . .

For the next few days it was possible to lay my hand on a package of soda in almost any part of our house. We had not really needed any, even a little. But we got it, and got it good and plenty. Nine packages in all and all were not in pound pokes. Some had gone beyond the letter of the law of pound parties, and brought much heavier packages of soda. Coffee stood next in abundance. It was put up in long red packages, and as one after another was sorted out, I reflected gloomily that it would take a long time to grind it all in our old coffee grinder. The knob on the crank of our coffee grinder was broken off, and it was hard to turn. And it was one of my regular jobs to grind the coffee. I wished the people had not brought so much. And then there was the rice. As father sorted over poke after poke of rice, even he was appalled, and said we would have to speak in Chinese after that. I did not know what he meant, but it evidently had something to do with rice.

And there was one pound of brown sugar. There was some granulated, but it was too much like sand to eat.

When we had prayers that night I really could not see how father had the heart to thank the Lord for all that soda, but he did. Maybe he got out of it by bulking everything together and giving thanks for the bulk.

And after that rice had been used up, I was never again so positive in my conviction that pound parties are unmixed blessings.

Chapter 15

MOTHER had been sick for a long time, and the house was never a very pleasant place when mother was sick. Of course Margaret did the cooking, and she was really very good at it. She was also pretty handy at keeping things straight about the house. But when mother was sick, everything was gloomy. The blinds had to be down in the room where she was, things got in an awful muss in spite of Margaret, and it was necessary to be absolutely quiet.

That was very bad. As a usual thing, when I went into the house I did not walk in quietly. I much preferred slipping up to the door, opening it noiselessly, and then bounding far into the room with a roar. This never failed to produce a marked effect on those within. But with mother sick, this was entirely out of the question, not only because the noise would make her worse, but also because it was not a very safe thing to burst into the room like that when father was in it alone.

So I had practically abandoned the house except for meals and at night. I came in for dinner and supper, but slipped out again as quickly as possible.

A peddler had passed through our way not many days before, and had displayed a marvellous device. There was a big wheel, a small wheel, and a very little wheel, all on one base and connected by belts. By turning a crank the big wheel revolved; and when it revolved the smaller wheel revolved also, only much faster. And with the turning of the small wheel, the very little wheel performed wonders. It just tore around. And by making a curve on the axle bar of this little wheel, a small sharp drill shot back and to with enormous force.

Of course father did not buy the machine from the peddler. But I had looked it over for a long time, and had figured out just how it was made. And while mother was sick I was trying to make one of the things. I used our big grindstone as the first wheel, sawed off the end of a gum tree for the second, and used a spool for the third. It was not all easy work, and the results were slow. Our grindstone was worn off too much on one side and was very wabbly. When I tried to get up much speed it zigzagged around and threw the belt off in spite of all I could do. And it was extremely hard to make a curve on the axle bar of the little wheel that would draw the drill back properly. It was forever getting hung up and throwing things out of gear. But I worked long and patiently, and soon had the thing rigged up until it worked with a speed and smoothness extremely pleasing.

I was working at it one morning when Margaret called me.

"Ben, come here, quick."

She spoke in a low frightened tone, and I did not even stop to ask what she wanted. I knew something was wrong.

"What is it?" I asked as I hurried up.

"Father wants you, quick."

I ran in. Father motioned for quiet. I tiptoed up to him.

"Ben, you saddle Bird and go over to Big Bend and get Mother. If you hurry you can get there to-night. Put the horse up and feed her, and you and Mother start back early to-morrow. Hurry, now."

"Is mother worse?"

"Yes, and much worse. She may not live if you fail to get back on time."

I hurried out as fast as I could run. I knew something terrible was the matter if Mother had to be sent for. She was father's mother. We called her Mother, and mother's mother Grandma, so as not to get the two mixed. Mother was a great hand to take care of sick people. She knew just how to tend them and what to let them eat. And she would do all the housework. Whenever anybody was just very bad sick, Mother was sent for.

I put my little light saddle on Bird, broke off a switch from a birch tree, got on and started. It was almost noon, and I would have to ride hard all day and far into the night to get to Big Bend. But I knew every minute counted. Bird seemed to understand it, too, for whenever the road was level enough she broke into her short choppy rack and never slowed down while the road was good.

My, how I did love to ride. From as far back as I could remember I had ridden horseback. At first it was behind father, and when the horse trotted he held the bridle with one hand and with the other got tight hold upon my leg and kept me steady. But because there were so many places I had to go alone, I soon learned to ride alone. And there was no horse that I had ever seen that I could not ride. None could throw me, for I knew just how they jumped, and when they would balk, and how they would lunge from side to side.

And the horses always took to me. Maybe it was because I usually fed them; or maybe it was because they could see I was not afraid of them. But they would always whinny when I came near, and stick out their noses to be rubbed. And Bird was my favourite. She was grey and plump, with a round soft back, and slim legs.

And as we travelled over the road to Big Bend I would stroke her mane, and pat her back of the saddle and talk to her. She would lay back her little ears and listen understandingly to all I had to say. And when we got to a place where the road was straight and level I would touch her with the whip lightly. She understood, and stretching out her neck she would lope rapidly along, her feet clattering on the ground and the trees flying past.

I had brought nothing to eat, and along in the afternoon I got very hungry. I decided I could do without anything until I reached Big Bend, but as the sun went down I became famished. I began to look for a house, and after a long time saw one up in a clearing not far from the road. I reined in and called,

"Hello," I called at the top of my voice. No answer.

"Hello," I called again.

I saw a little girl slip cautiously around the corner of the house and look down at me.

"Anybody at home?" I yelled at her.

She stood looking at me for a moment, and then turned and ran back round the house. Soon a tall woman, with light hair hanging down about her face, came round the corner. She wore a faded blue dress that came down almost to her ankles, and was barefooted.

"Could I get something to eat here?" I called to her.

"Where you from?" she answered back.

I told her. I told her all about myself, who I was, where I was going and why. She knew both father and mother, and thawed out on the instant.

"I hain't got nothing much in the house, but I guess we can find something. Nellie you go git five years of corn fer the horse. Git big yaller years. Come on up, Bennie, and we will see what we can find."

I didn't want to stop, but I was hungry and I knew Bird ought to be fed. So I went up. Nellie came down with the corn, and I laid it down on the grass and took the bits out of Bird's mouth, and let her eat it. The woman went inside, and soon came out with a big hunk of yellow pone and a cup of sweet milk. I ate it with great relish while she stood leaning up against the door watching me. When I had finished I sprang up and went over to Bird. She had not finished her corn, and was struggling to bite it off the cob. I picked up the unfinished ears and shelled off the corn so she could eat it quicker; and she, sensing the need for haste, lipped it up in great mouthfuls.

"So Anne be sick, eh?" the woman asked me.

"Yes, she's very bad. I must get back with Mother to-morrow night."

"Hain't ye afeerd to ride by yourself at night?"

Now it happened that I was afraid, most horribly afraid, for Mother had often told us of panthers jumping off limbs onto the horse's back while she had been riding under trees at night. One reason we all liked so well for Mother to come to our house was that she would sit knitting until long into the night, and with us gathered round her, would tell us all sorts of stories. Some were funny, and others were awful. I liked the latter best when she was telling them, but the stories of those panthers had haunted me all day. But I wasn't going to tell her so.

"No, I ain't afraid. Nothing to be afraid of."

"Hain't ye afeerd of painters?"

"Huh, there are no panthers any more."

"I have hearn tell of whole dens of 'em."

"I ain't afraid."

"What's wrong with Anne?" she asked suddenly.

"Don't know. She's just bad sick."

"Sick of what?"

"Nothing. Just sick."

"How many air there in your family?" she asked pointedly.

"Three."

"Air you the baby?" I thought she laughed slightly, and I did not answer. Bird had eaten her corn by this time, and putting the bits back into her mouth I swung up into the saddle.

"Good-bye," I called over my shoulder, and was gone.

I rode on and on and on. I got so tired sitting in the saddle that I would stand up in the stirrups, then on one foot, and then slip back out of the saddle. And as a last expedient I would throw my leg up over the horn of the saddle and ride aside like a woman.

There was a long twilight, when the trees stood very still and the crickets chirped by the side of the road: Then it got dusk, and the stumps and fallen trees looked uneven and ghostly. And finally it got dark, very dark. When I could see the sky the stars looked very dim and distant; and when we went through thick woods I could see absolutely nothing. At such times I would give Bird her head and allow her to choose her way.

And panthers! In my imagination every overhanging bough concealed one, and every noise of the night I imagined was the soft beat of one's tail as it patted stealthily while preparing to spring. But as the night wore on, nothing happened, and just as a little disc of a moon peeped above a dark silent mountain, I reached Big Bend.

They were all in bed, and I sat on the horse in the yard while I called out to them. Soon the door opened and Uncle Benjamin stepped out. He had on a short rought night-shirt that Mother had made for him, spinning the material herself. He was so tall that he had had to stoop slightly when he came through the door, and he stood there on the porch barefooted, a very mountain of a man. He was even bigger than father.

"Who's there?" his big voice boomed out at me.

"It's Ben. I've come for Mother," I said.

"Who is it? Ben?" and I heard Mother's voice from within. Soon she came out, wearing a trim white little night-cap and with a large shawl engulfing her.

I knew just how she looked before she came out and peered up into my face. She had not changed a bit. Mother was always tidy. Father told her once she would stop to fix up before she went out if the house were on fire. And she looked it. Always neat, her white hair coiled up on her head, her voice slow and comfortable, with a little purr in it. And then there was her little chin. It was a funny little thing, sticking out rakishly from her soft throat. O, I liked Mother all right.

"Why, if it isn't Bennie," she cried delightedly, pulling me down from the horse. "Come right in, and I'll fix you a big bowl of mush and milk. My, how you have grown. O, and what's wrong?" she stopped suddenly.

"Mother is bad sick, and father sent me after you."

"Anne sick? And what ails her?"

"Just sick."

"Poor Anne. I must go to her at once." That was Mother. She took right hold of a thing the minute she knew about it, and nothing ever lagged when she was around. Outside of mother herself, I would rather have her in the house than anybody else.

We went inside while Uncle Benjamin put up Bird. Mother soon had me a great bowl of hot mush and milk, and I ate until there was no more in sight. Then I was very sleepy; and soon I was in a cool fresh bed, from which I never stirred until called to breakfast the next morning.

It was still early. The road down by the river bend was damp and cool as we rode over it. The river murmured over the shoals, and the mist had lifted from it and was just clearing the mountains. Paw-paw bushes grew by the road, and their green leaves glistened with the dew. I breathed the cool sweet air down into my lungs and was glad for the long road that lay before us that day.

We seldom talked. Mother rode on ahead of me on a big bay horse. It took long steps, and as it stepped along Mother would sway back and to in the saddle. Her long riding skirt trailed down and hid the saddle girth; and she kept her head steadfastly to the front.

We were within a few miles of home when we met a man who had been by our house that morning. He said he had inquired about mother.

"Don't say a word!" Mother said to him, so sharply that I was astonished at her.

"I understand, Mrs. Rhodes," he said gently.

"If it's bad news," she explained nervously, "I must be where I can lay right down. I couldn't stand it. O, I couldn't stand it," she wailed.

When we turned the bend and saw our house, we saw father standing like a statue by the gate. He saw us, but for some time he continued to stand like an image. Somehow I didn't feel at all anxious. I never had really been alarmed about mother. Deep in my heart I was convinced that she would get well all right. But Mother was plainly nervous. She didn't hurry her horse forward, but as it walked along and she swayed back and to, there was a wild anxious look about her that spoke far louder than words. When we crossed Little

Creek, father came rapidly toward us. And when I saw his face, I knew that I had been right all along. For he was all smiles, and there was a spring and jauntiness about his step that certainly was not there when I went away.

"Hello, Mother," he hailed us. "Hello, Ben. My, what a trip you must have made. Back before dark!"

"Well, well, now, if it isn't Peter," Mother called to him, her soft voice gurgling with delight. "And how is she?"

I really didn't listen to what father said. I didn't need to. I knew from the way he acted that she was all right. It struck me first as terribly comic to hear Mother call him Peter. Most men called him Brother when speaking to him, and the Parson when he wasn't around. I was used to that, and also used to hearing mother call him Tommy. But Peter! I wanted to laugh right out. And then I was puzzled by the way father acted. It wasn't as if mother were better. From the way he laughed and jumped around she might have been right out there with him.

"Everything is all right now, son. You put the horses away and feed them, and then come back. I want to show you something."

I went out and put the horses away, and came back slowly. Father met me at the door. He smiled and pulled me into the room.

"Come here, son."

I followed him in. On the bed over in the corner mother was lying, and at the foot of the bed, her little chin almost hid by her smiles, Mother was standing. I went up to the bed. Mother smiled wanly. Then she put out her hand for me to hold. I got it, and looked down at her. For a moment I stood there, not saying a word, until father reached over my shoulder and pulled back the covers slightly.

I was completely dumfounded by what I saw. In the crook of mother's elbow was a little red wrinkled baby! Its little eyes were almost covered by the wrinkles that seemed the most prominent part about it, and it moved slightly in an aimless way. I looked closer and saw that its nose was not red and wrinkled like the rest of it, but looked white and soft, almost transparent.

I looked up at mother. She was regarding me and the baby by turns, and as her eyes rested upon it, they seemed to glow with a soft and steady fire. Her face was so soft and tender that it made me feel ashamed.

For my first emotion had been surprise, but this had quickly changed to disgust, and to disgust had been added resentment when I saw how mother looked at the baby. I wanted to get out, away from the horrible little thing.

"What do you think of her, Ben?" father asked jovially.

"Her?" I asked in some perplexity.

"Sure. Her. The baby. It's a girl. What do you think of her?"

I simply could not think what I thought of her. But in my heart I knew she was the ugliest creature I had ever seen.

Mother leaned down over the bed and picked her up. She kicked out a little red foot and waved chubby arms awkwardly.

"How like Anne she is," Mother said, holding her close and then off at arms' length as if to get a more accurate appraisal. "Just Anne over again. How is you, little Anne?" and she hugged her closely.

And Little Anne she was ever called.

Chapter 16

MOTHER had been with us a week before we could persuade her to tell us any stories. In her mild way she made it perfectly clear that there were things she had to do that could not be put off.

"Well, well, now, it beats all how things have run down since Anne got sick. Here the yard is all cluttered up with trash; the kitchen is a sight; and the whole house looks like it had never been swept."

And from the way she started in to clean up, all she said and more might literally have been true.

Margaret had heard all, but without resentment. She had had such a hard time of it that she could feel only relief that another had taken the burden off her shoulders.

"She can say what she pleases, as long as I don't have to do the work," she told me candidly.

And Mother took hold like a general.

She first sent father out into the yard with instructions to clean up everything. She emphasised the last word by an inflection all her own, that made father understand that everything whatever was to be set in order. And I was glad she did, for he was forever preaching about not leaving undone anything that ought to be done, and it tickled me to have the tables turned. She called him Peter, and that tickled me most of all.

But what amazed me most was the way she ordered him around. It was just like he ordered me around.

But the surprising thing about it was, that he did everything she said. Sometimes when she spoke sharply to him, like an officer whipping out a command the way Ash Hayes said officers did, I held my breath for fear of what he might do. But he took it as a matter of course, and did just what she told him.

She herself started in the kitchen. She turned up a stove lid and made some blacking out of the soot, and polished the stove until it shone like enamel. Then she got down on her knees and went thoroughly over the floor. It looked darker and worse than ever just after she had finished it. But it soon dried, and then it was white and sweet. She took a whole day for the dishes and pots and pans and kettles. She scoured the dish pans and the coffeepot last, and by a clever twist of her finger against their surface she made them look as if they were set with stones.

And after everything in the kitchen had been done, and she had surveyed the result to make sure there was nothing more to do, she started in on the rest of the house. To begin with, she piled most of the furniture out in the yard. Father came up just about that time. He cast one look about him and went in where mother was.

"Anne, several of the people up at the River are sick, and I am afraid I shall have to go up and spend a day or two with them."

He looked greatly downhearted at having to go.

Mother was a lot more like her old self, for her eyes twinkled as father spoke.

"I am sorry, Tommy. But don't be gone any longer than you can help," she said.

It was Wednesday, and father declared he would hurry back just as soon as possible. He went out in the yard where Mother was at work. He was jovial.

"A fine work you are doing, mother. But you have a big job on hand. How long will it take to finish it?"

"Three days, at the least," she answered, vigorously shaking a rug.

"Well, if any one calls for me, I am up at the River. I have to go up there to visit some sick people."

She regarded him closely for a moment, and went on shaking the rug.

Between Margaret and Mother as housekeeper during those first few days, I would have chosen Margaret with alacrity. The way Mother scattered things about was a nightmare. And when father started off to the River appointment, I also slunk out to the grindstone to work on my drill.

But she espied me just when I counted myself safe.

"Bennie, you come here and help beat this rug."

I went back reluctantly, and went to work.

My, those days that followed! Most of the furniture piled out in the yard; not a rug in the house, except in mother's room, but was taken out and beaten. The bedding was out in the sun to air; floors were mopped up; and last of all an enormous washing done! Then the process of rehabilitation was begun. O, Mother was thorough!

But by Saturday morning everything was straightened up. The living room was clean and fresh; the kitchen was immaculate; even the little storage room was in perfect order. The windows were open, and the white curtains were fanned by the fresh breezes. It was then that I decided Mother was a better housekeeper than Margaret.

Along in the forenoon father came back from the River. All the sick people were getting on nicely, and his spirits were high. And late that afternoon he started for Oakum Mills for Sunday.

Saturday evening Mother finished the supper dishes and put everything in order. She seemed very happy and contented. Along about dusk she lit the lamp on the reading table. She had boiled the burner and scoured the globe, and it gave a bright cheerful light. She got her knitting and settled comfortably for the evening.

That was the time I had been looking forward to. Margaret and I went over and sat down close to her.

"Tell us a story, Mother," I implored.

"Do, Mother," Margaret seconded.

"What will I tell you about?"

Her voice was soft and purring.

"Anything. Just anything!"

"About eagles?"

I thrilled.

"Yes. Eagles, or bears, or anything."

"Or fairies."

"Or wildcats or catamounts."

"Or princes."

Her knitting needles flew rapidly around the heel of a heavy yarn sock. Her face wore a look of deep repose and contentment.

"Well, well, now. Let me see. I'll tell you about Dead Man's Cave, and what became of your Uncle Robert. Will that do?"

"Do tell us," we both exclaimed at once.

And she began the tale. I had heard something about it before, but had forgotten how it came out.

"Well, it was a long time ago. We lived a long way up the river then, and your Uncle Robert was just a year older than I. He had a very close friend, whose name was Harry Duffield. Now, neither Harry nor your Uncle Robert had ever been out in the world, and they wanted to go. A drummer from the city had stopped at our place over night once, and had told them many things about the life out there. They could get a dollar a day for work; and people wore good clothes all the time. They wore white collars every day. And from the time he was there, they had wanted to go away. They began to save up their money, and at last they had enough to start on.

"Away back in the mountains from where we lived, an old Indian lived alone in a little cabin. His name was Nigro. When his people had gone on out west, he had refused to go along, and had remained behind, living all alone in his little cabin.

"He was tall and brown. He seldom wore any clothes above his waist, and his lean brown body was bare from the waist up. His nose flattened out on his face, and his long black hair fell in oily curls about his head. We never knew just what he did for a living, except that he trapped a lot in the winter time, and took people down the river in his canoe in the summer.

"When Harry and your Uncle Robert were ready to go out into the world, they hired old Nigro to take them down to the Kanawha. It was a long trip, and he charged a lot, for when he should come back up the river alone he would have to wade up the shoals and drag the canoe. But there was no other way of getting down, so they had to get him.

"My, my, I did not want Robert to go away. He was just a year older than I was, and he was that cheerful with his happy blue eyes. We had been together as far back as I could remember, and the thought of losing him made me sick and lonely.

"And then there was Harry. We were both seventeen, and he had been coming to our house a lot. He and I——"

"But, Mother, how could Robert be my Uncle if he was your brother?" I interrupted.

"He was your Great Uncle, but we just called him Uncle," she explained.

"Well, they started. I can remember yet just how it looked the morning they went away. We had got up very early. The ground out by the river was damp from the heavy dew. The river was grey and still. The fog had just lifted, but everything was still damp. The dew was heavy on the big water birches that grew by the river, and it kept falling into the water with big heavy splashes.

"And then they shoved the canoe off. Old Nigro sat about the centre, and just back of him was their baggage, covered over with a black oilcloth. Harry sat in the back, and Robert up front. They waved us good-bye, and Nigro paddled away.

"They were to take their time going down. Your Uncle Robert loved to fish, and they had decided to stop whenever they felt like it, and camp and fish for a few days. And there were good places to fish down that way.

"Nigro did not care how long they stopped, for he was getting his board free, and that was about all he ever seemed to care about. So when they came to a place where the fishing looked good, your Uncle Robert would tell him to stop, and they would land and camp there as long as they felt like it. One day they were in the canoe and Nigro was paddling rapidly along, when your Uncle Robert saw a place that looked like a very good spot to camp, and the river looked deep and inviting.

" 'How is that, Nigro? A good place to try our luck, I am thinking. Suppose you pull in.'

"Contrary to his usual good-natured obedience, Nigro paid no heed, but paddled stolidly on as though he had not heard.

" 'Did you hear, Nigro? I said that was a good place to put in.'

"Nigro half turned in his seat until he faced the landing. He looked at it intently, and then slowly lifted his eyes until they rested on a great crag that jutted out from the mountain-side in a curious resemblance to the upper part of a human skull. His eyes shifted uneasily, and he faced squarely down the stream.

" 'That Dead Man's Cave. Me no stop,' he said shortly.

" 'But I say you will stop,' your Uncle Robert said, rising.

"The Indian paid no heed whatever. Your Uncle laid his hand on the paddle. Nigro turned swiftly in his seat until he faced about. His body was bare from the waist up, and under his copper-coloured skin his muscles tightened. He fixed upon Robert a look of steady menacing resolve.

" 'That Dead Man's Cave. Me no stop.'

" 'Better let him go on, Bob,' Harry said nervously. 'Plenty of good places farther down.'

" 'O, all right, if he wants to act that way about it,' and he sat down."

I liked the way Mother told her stories. She would get so interested herself that she tried to make her voice sound like the people she was telling about; and she would use big words without stopping to tell us what they meant. Father would sometimes tell us stories, but when he used a big word he would ask us if we knew what it meant. Of course we did not, and he would stop so long to explain its meaning that we forgot a lot of the story. But not so with Mother, and while we did not always know what the words meant she used, we could easily understand what she was saying. So she went on.

"Well, that night they camped a mile or two further down the river. After they had eaten their supper, your Uncle and Harry were alone.

" 'What did you think of the old boy up there?' your Uncle asked. He had been much mystified by the way Nigro had acted.

" 'Don't know what to make of it. Little off up here, I guess,' he answered, tapping his forehead significantly.

" 'Never heard of it before. What do you say we pump him about it?'

" 'He looked mighty all-fired solemn when you spoke to him about it up there. You know, Bob, we can't afford to contrary him now.'

" 'I know we can't. But I'm going to find out what he got so uppish about, just the same.'

" 'Better go easy. They are treacherous, those Indians.'

" 'Never you fear.'

"It was not long before your Uncle got a chance to speak with Nigro.

" 'By the way, Nigro, what's this about that Dead Man's Cave?'

" 'It just that, Dead Man's Cave. Men die.'

" 'What do you mean, that men die. Is there some one there that kills them? Speak out, man.'

" 'Indian go, him no come back. White man go, him no come back. It Dead Man's Cave.'

"And that was absolutely all he would say.

"Robert's curiosity was aroused. He had heard of Indian superstition before, but he had never known a concrete case of it. Evidently the Indians had made up some legend about the mountain, and it had got such a hold upon them that they had come to believe it.

"And he meant to look into the matter. Partly because he was curious, and partly also because he was vexed with Nigro and wanted to show his superstition groundless.

" 'I'm going up there and see what there is in it,' he said to Harry, bright the next morning.

" 'What's the use to get worked up over it? Fishing's good here.'

" 'O, I'm just curious. Come along?'

" 'No. I saw the bass jumping out in that deep hole there. Guess this spot is good enough for me.'

" 'Maybe Nigro will go.'

" 'Better not try him,' and Harry smiled.

"But your Uncle did try him.

" 'Nigro, I am going up on Dead Man's Cave this morning. Want to go along?'

"He looked at Robert a long time, showing great emotion. He came over and put his hand on his shoulder. Robert had never seen him so moved before.

" 'Him good father. You no come back. Not go.'

" 'Sure my father's all right, but I'll come back. Have the fish fried brown, Harry,' and he hurried down to the river.

"He untied the canoe and pushed off. Harry watched him paddle easily up the river and turn the bend. Then he was lost from sight.

"Harry fished for an hour or more in the deep pool under the shade of the mountain, and with good luck. Five great black perch and a blue cat. And as the sun peeped up over the mountain and lit up the blue depths, he strolled slowly up to the camp.

" 'Cook 'em brown, Nigro. Bob will be starved after climbing that hill.'

"But at dinner time your Uncle Robert had not returned. They waited one hour, then two, three. Still he was not back, and they ate their meal in silence.

" 'Guess he's old enough to take care of himself,' said Harry easily.

" 'Him no come back. Dead Man's Cave,' answered Nigro stolidly.

" 'Nonsense, Nigro. You have that cave on your brain,' for Harry was plainly irritated.

"But when evening came on and Robert had not returned, he was plainly uneasy.

" 'Of course there's nothing to the Indian's cave story, but something must be wrong. Bob likes fried fish too well to stay away all this time,' and he smiled.

"He sat up until long in the night, and his pipe made a solitary glow in the darkness by the river. He looked up at the mountains around him, the mountains silent and mysterious, their sides covered with trees that did not so much as stir. He listened to the distant murmur of the shoals. And he felt very much alone and lonely. Off up the river to his left he heard the loud shrill cry of a wildcat. The air became chill, and the dew lay heavily about him. There was a rustle behind him and he jerked quickly about. It was only some night thing.

" 'Pshaw. I'm getting fidgety as an old woman,' he exclaimed.

"He got up and shook himself impatiently and went to bed.

"The next morning he went to Nigro impatiently.

" 'Now see here, if you know anything about that cave that you have not told us, it's time you out with it.'

"Nigro threw up his hands. He had evidently passed a restless night. His face was drawn and deep leathery wrinkles had appeared above the corners of his mouth.

" 'No one come back. Me no tell,' he said desperately.

" 'Well, I know one that will go and come back,' and Harry started off toward the river.

"To his surprise Nigro laid a hand upon his shoulder.

And his grip was so tight that his fingers sunk into the flesh and made Harry wince.

"'You no go,' he implored.

"'Go hell,' Harry returned fiercely. 'Do you think I will sit around here without trying to find out what is the matter?' and again he made off.

"I forgot to tell you that Nigro had a little dog along with him," Mother explained suddenly. "Yes, he never went anywhere without that little dog."

"Was he as big as Ponto?" I asked.

"No, not quite. He was little and yellow." She stopped for a moment and sighed. Then she settled herself more comfortably, and her knitting needles flew around each other.

"Well, Harry took the little dog and set out up the river. What had kept Robert away? he asked himself over and over. He could have no object whatever in staying away so long. But what had happened? Was there, after all, some truth in the legend of Dead Man's Cave? Was it superstition, or was there some secret, terrible and bloody, up there at the dead-head crag?

"Just before he turned the bend in the river he looked back toward the little camp. Old Nigro, tall and bare from his waist, stood by the water's edge, his arms folded, looking intently after him. He looked sombre and prophetic as he stood there watching. It was as if he were saying good-bye.

"When Harry reached the place where Robert had wanted to stop on the way down, he found the canoe, securely tied to the root of a water birch. It had swung around against the bank, and had evidently been in that position for a long time. There was something terribly suggestive about it.

"Harry looked at it a moment, examined the rope with which it was tied, rose, and looked slowly up at the mountain. Layer upon layer it reared its mighty bulk, covered by an uneven growth of pine; up and up and up to the very summit, where towered Dead Man's Cave, which, with an inscrutable smile, seemed to be keeping death-watch over the surrounding hills. The indescribable grandeur of the lonely place filled him with awe and dread in spite of himself. But he snapped to his dog and started up.

"For an hour they climbed, over fallen trees and uneven rocks, now slipping in the moist loose soil, now balancing dangerously on the loose stones. They reached the summit. The dog was running importantly here and there, smelling at the roots of trees and sniffing curiously in holes. But as they began to go out toward Dead Man's Cave, he came up to Harry, and the two went along together. And together they reached the mouth of the Cave.

"The sight that met their eyes was terrible. Bones—on all sides, to the right, to the left, bones. Bones of animals, and bones of men. Dead Man's Cave was real. The dog sniffed the bones curiously, and trotted into the cave. While Harry stood looking about him with a horrible fear and nausea stealing over him, the dog returned. It ran to the edge of the precipice, looked over toward the river, turned and whined piteously. Then it fell over in a paroxysm. Harry stood and watched in a daze. The dog kicked out jerkily, rolled over and over, then threw back its head and gasped. In another moment it was dead.

"Harry felt a cold sweat breaking out all over him. He looked around him in panic, and felt a strong desire to break and run. But by an effort he pulled himself together and peered into the cave. A few feet ahead of him he saw a familiar shape. Something recognisable lay sprawled out on the floor of the cave. He approached it cautiously, his eyes not quite accustomed to the dim light. He was right. It was your Uncle Robert. He was dead."

Mother stopped for a moment. With a vacant look in her eyes she sat rocking to and fro. I was wildly curious.

"And then?" I prompted.

"O!" she said.

"Well, and then he was seized with panic. He backed out of the cave and looked about him desperately. But nothing was in sight. He stood for a moment, and then stepped resolutely back into the cave. Walking cautiously, he reached the body of your Uncle Robert. He stopped and listened intently.

"And then he heard a noise. It was a gliding, writhing sound, as of wet leaves being torn apart. Then he saw and sprang back. He had seen what it was."

"And what was it?" I asked eagerly.

"A den of copperheads."

"And did they get him?"

"No, but they got your Uncle Robert."

"Was he dead?"

"Yes, he was dead."

"And what did he do to the snakes?"

"He filled the cave with brush and set fire to it."

"Were they killed?"

"I suppose so."

For a long time she was silent, rocking to and fro. Her knitting was forgotten. I sat pondering. She sighed.

"Did Harry go on to the Kanawha?" I asked at last.

"No, he came back home."

"And what did he do then?"

She brightened, looked at us happily, and smiled.

"O! He is your grandfather!"

Chapter 17

BY the end of the second winter, I had got used to Hen's being away. At first it had been hard. When I went to school by myself, I missed him dreadfully. And when I went up on the hill alone after fodder, I got very lonesome. Besides, I had to make two trips after fodder, where, when he had been at home, I had made only one. But as the second winter wore away, I got used to doing the work myself and really didn't think much about him any more.

But one beautiful spring day father announced that Hen was coming home. I thought I had grown quite indifferent to him. But when father said he was coming home I felt greatly elated. And a few days later, when I got on Bird and tied old Bill's halter to the horn of my saddle and started to meet him, I was all eagerness. I wanted to see Hen.

If I had not been bothered by old Bill, I would have looked forward to the ride to Monroe. But it was not very much fun to ride with old Bill pulling along behind. Whenever Bird broke into a trot he lagged along behind, stretching out his neck and pulling back, trotting only when he had to in order to keep up, and even then jogging along in a lazy ambling way. Once or twice I cut him over the neck with my switch, hoping to stir him up in that way, but he only pulled back the harder and shied off to get out of reach. And when he did that the halter sawed so over my leg that I gave up in despair.

But it was a great trip, aside from that. In many places men were out burning brush on the hillsides they had cleared during the winter, and as I passed along I could see the brush heaps burning, the green limbs curling and singing as they burned. Occasionally when a half burned heap fell in, the red flames shot up and little white flakes of ashes floated lazily in the air.

The road lay along the creek in many places, and by many deep holes boys were sitting, holding big crooked poles in their hands and waiting vainly for a bite. Old rusty bait cans and charred logs were scattered about profusely. Sometimes the boys looked at me in silence as I rode by. And at one shallow hole a little fellow not more than nine had just got a bite, and was sitting tense and eager, holding his pole in readiness.

I rode along by fences, and more than once fat grey squirrels jumped off the ground with a great chattering, looking at me nervously for a moment, and then went tearing away down the fence, their big bushy tails streaming out behind them. And often on the lower rails little brown chipmunks sat up on their haunches, alert but motionless.

I passed by one place where they were having a log-rolling, and men from far and near were gathered together in the field. The trees had been cut and trimmed up. Boys were dragging the limbs and piling them in heaps to be burned; men with long handspikes were rolling the logs together. I stopped for a moment to watch a giant young fellow try to roll a big log alone. There must have been some bet up, for the others did not offer to help him, but crowded around to watch. He went up, cleared the dirt from under the log so he could get his handspike under, and then bent his shoulder to it. Setting his feet, with legs slightly apart, he began to lift. His great shoulders humped up as his legs began to straighten out. I saw his face get red, and the veins on his neck stand out. But slowly the log moved, and then with one mighty final effort he snapped his body straight, and the big log rolled clumsily down the hill.

"Fine work, that, Bill," a number cried, and turned to their work.

But I did not stop long. I was too eager to get to Monroe. Monroe was a little place, father said, compared to the cities where there were as many as seventeen telephone wires on the poles, but it was a wonderful place to me. The board sidewalk was wonderful. It was that above all things that impressed me. I loved to walk on it. Hen had written that it was easy to keep step with any one on a board walk, because he could hear his feet as they struck the boards. I was barefooted, but I could walk on it just the same, and I wanted to try to imagine how it would sound if I did have shoes on and were trying to keep step with some one.

But I was doomed to disappointment. When I got within a few miles of town I met Hen. He had got there before me, and had not waited, but knowing by which road I would come in, had started out to meet me. He was carrying his suit case, and it seemed heavy, for he was all pulled over to one side. But when he saw me he yelled out.

"Hello, Ben."

"Hello," I answered, forgetting any disappointment at not getting in to town.

Hen had changed someway. He had grown a lot, and was much taller than when he had left home. But it was not that altogether. He had on a pair of long pants, his shoes were neat, and there seemed to be an air about him that had not been there when he left home.

His hair was cut, and that made a big difference. Father had always cut our hair, and while he never failed to get it off, it often looked funny when he got through. But Hen's was even and neat. Hen always had looked different from the other boys, but he looked more so now.

He seemed very eager to get started back home. He tied the suit case on old Bill's saddle, got on himself, and we started briskly back.

"How is every one at home?" he asked.

"Fine. Ed Rainey got his leg broke by a log rolling on him, but he is better now."

"What work did you have in school this year?"

"O, same old things. Arithmetic, Fifth Reader and Grammar."

"Did you like the new teacher?"

"You bet! He took me up home with him over Sunday once."

"How does he teach the school?"

"O, he just teaches. But he's not hard like Aaron Willet. He says scholars must look off their books at times because they can't stand it to study all the time."

"Does he whip the scholars any?"

"Some. He whipped Bill Hunter and Charlie Snowden hard once for waylaying Minnie McRand and rocking her."

"Did they get mad?"

"Some. How did you like your school?"

"It was fine."

"Did they let out at four?"

"They didn't do that way. You just came and recited, and then went back home."

"Didn't you have to stay in the schoolhouse and study?"

"No, we just went there to recite. The last class I had was physics. It came at two and lasted till three."

"Physics? What's that?"

"O, that tells you why water won't go up when you pour it out of a bucket, and things like that."

This was a poser for me. Of course I knew that water would go down to the ground, but I never had thought what made it do it. I had supposed it just fell. I pondered for a long time.

"Well, why is it?"

"The law of gravitation."

"Does it do it?"

"Sure. Just pulls it right down."

I didn't know what the law of gravitation was, but the explanation was entirely satisfactory. We rode on in silence.

It was nearly dark before I asked a question that had been puzzling me for a long time.

"Where will we stop for the night, Hen?"

"We won't stop. Go on home to-night."

I was very tired, but I was willing to go on home. I never liked to stay away from home at night. It was all right until about time to go to bed, and then I got terribly homesick. It was never nice to sleep away from home.

It was along about midnight that we turned the bend and came in sight of our house. We couldn't really see the house, for the fog was thick over the river, and it spread up around our house like white soft down. But as we got nearer and nearer, the outlines of the house began to stand out indistinctly. All was very quiet.

Old Ponto came out growling as we approached. But I drew my breath in between my puckered lips in a kind of low squeak. He recognised me at once and commenced to bound around, whining eagerly. Then

Hen spoke his name, and Ponto stopped and pricked up his ears.

"Come on, Ponto," Hen said again encouragingly, as he got off old Bill.

I thought Ponto would go crazy. He ran up to Hen, his whole body writhing and undulating from side to side, and his tail wagging so furiously that it almost lifted his hind feet from the ground. He licked Hen's hands, jumped up impulsively and licked his face, and then started running in little circles about him, jumping up, turning, and keeping up a series of little yelps.

"Nice old doggie," and Hen grabbed him and hugged him. Ponto broke loose and kept up his general jubilations.

The door opened quickly, and a flash of white appeared. Just a moment it lingered, peering eagerly forward, and then it made straight for Hen. I was amazed, for we had made but very little noise. When Hen had talked to Ponto it had been in an undertone. But there mother stood, her arms about Hen, clinging to him as though she would never let loose.

Again I felt the old pang of jealousy. Mother seemed to think more of Hen than she did of me. And again I wished that I might go away, far away, and be in great peril. But even as I thought, mother broke away from Hen, stood limply for a moment, and started toward the door sobbing. I was amazed, but in some way I attributed it to Hen.

"What did you do?" I demanded fiercely.

"Nothing," Hen answered nonplussed.

As she reached the door father appeared. He saw her and put his arm about her.

"Here, here, honey. You are all upset," he said soothingly.

"O, Tommy, it's too good to be true," she sobbed.

For a long time we sat up before going to bed. A single lamp was burning in the room, and near it Hen sat. Mother sat a little distance from him, looking at him tenderly, her eyes resting on every movement of his face as he talked proudly of his work in school. And father walked around aimlessly, running his fingers through his hair and saying, "Pshaw," "Well, I declare," and things like that, to no one in particular.

And when at last Hen and I went off to bed, mother followed and helped him off with his clothes, taking his collar from him as he took it off his neck, pulling his shirt-sleeve down over his hand. It was warm, but when we got into bed she hovered around, asking whether he wanted another cover, and if he felt perfectly comfortable.

And I was bitter with resentment. I remembered a story father had told in a sermon, of a prodigal son who had gone away and had a fine time, and spent lots of money, and of another son who had staid at home and done all the work. But when the prodigal came back home, every one made over him, and no one thought of thanking the son who had staid at home and worked the farm. I thought that was like it was with Hen and me. And I wished fiercely that I could go away and come back home and have everybody making over me.

The next morning we had a late breakfast. Mother had been in the kitchen a long time when Hen and I got up. It was her moving about that had wakened us. I got out of bed and slipped into my old blue shirt and brown pants that mother had made me. I watched Hen closely, for I wondered whether he would put on his store clothes. But he didn't. He put on an old pair of pants that mother had made him, too.

"Putting on your old britches, Hen?" I asked.

"You don't want to say britches, Ben. It's breeches."

"How do you know?"

"I learned that over at school. No one said britches there."

He put them on, any way, and we tumbled out to the kitchen. Mother was fussing about the stove, very busily engaged. She soon called out that all was ready.

Father sat at the head of the table, and mother at the other end. Hen and I sat on one side. Margaret was alone on the other. Father returned thanks in his most awful voice, and after saying all that he usually said, he thanked God that he had kept our ranks unbroken. I didn't know what he meant by our ranks, and couldn't see how a rank could be broken, for we usually called things rank when they had a terrible smell. But mother seemed to understand, for she said "Amen" under her breath when father finished.

We had big hot soft biscuits, baked with buttermilk, and fresh cane molasses, and bacon and eggs. And there was a great plenty for all of us. I thought then that it was nice, even if it was all done for Hen, because I got just as much to eat as he did. And when we went out behind the house after breakfast, I was tickled still more, for there was a chicken's head by the wood-block.

Hen and I wandered about the place for a long time. He wanted to go to the stable and look round, and go up on the hill and see the corn field, and down to the creek and see whether the bank swallows had built their nests in holes dug in the creek bank. We went down to the river and looked at the cut-off, and went out on a big log-raft and sat down with our feet in the water. But at last he said he thought he would go up to the store. I wanted to get a fish hook and see whether I couldn't catch some of the big fish we saw swimming under the raft, so I did not go with him.

Margaret was out in the yard when I went up after the fish hook. She had grown very tall the last year or two, and while she was very slim, she nevertheless looked very plump and round. Before Hen had gone away to school, Margaret and I had not gone around together much, because I always went with Hen. But when he left, Margaret got to going places with me, and we had come to be very great friends. She did not make fun of the things I said and did, as Hen had always done. So I told her many things that I had never thought of telling him. How, for instance, I wanted to set up a store, and be a big storekeeper when I grew up; or how I meant to go off to school and get an education and come back and be a big man in Barren Rocks, like old Alex McRand, or Ash Hayes. She always heard me seriously, and when I had finished, would say that she knew I could do it, and that she would be very proud of me when the time came.

And then she would tell me what she wanted to do. First she intended to have a big millinery store, and make beautiful hats, and sell them to fine people. And she intended to save up a lot of money and get some beautiful clothes for herself, more beautiful than anything we had ever seen. They should even be finer than the pictures in the Journal and Messenger. And when she had everything fixed up, she would be sure to meet somebody—some fine handsome person, like father, for instance, only young and cheerful.

She was usually very indefinite along toward the end, as though she had not thought out yet just how everything should end up, but always there was the fine handsome somebody, and in some way that was not exactly clear to me, everything would be all right as soon as he appeared.

Because we had got to be such good friends, I liked to have her with me. When I saw her out in the yard, I went over.

"Come and go down with me to fish, Margaret."

"Where is Hen?"

"Gone to the store."

"All right. Go and get the poles."

Together we went down. I caught some crickets by turning up some old boards and stones that lay near the water, and putting one on my hook I let it sink down between the logs. For a long time I sat there, waiting for a fish to bite, but I felt no pull. I drew up the hook, and the cricket was still on, with the water dripping off its slim glossy legs. I lay down on the raft and looked down between the logs. Occasionally I could see a big pink sucker swim lazily by. But when I dropped the hook back in, there was no bite.

I got discouraged after a while, and laid the line down on the log.

"Guess they won't bite."

Margaret was sitting on the upper end of the raft, her feet drawn up under her, looking dreamily off up the river. When I went up to her she did not move. She seemed to be looking at an overhanging water-birch away up the river, but I knew from the far-off expression on her face that she did not see it.

"What are you thinking of, Margaret?"

"O, just thinking."

"What about?"

"Ben, do you know Brooks Hollingshead?" she asked suddenly.

"Sure, I see him every time I go to the store."

"Does he ever say anything when you see him?"

"Sure he does. He's fine."

"Did you see him at church Sunday?"

"Sat over by the stove."

"Did you notice how wavy his hair is?"

"Don't like curly hair. What you thinking about him?"

"O, nothing. Do you like him?"

"Sure. We all like him. He gives us peanuts and cinnamon bark."

"And did you notice his eyes? how nice they are?"

"Eyes? Where?"

"At church. He leaned back in his seat and looked around, so," and she leaned back on the log and looked keenly about.

"More like this," and I tried it.

"After the service he came up to father and talked to him. Father introduced me to him," she added dreamily.

"Did he shake hands with you?" I wanted to know.

"Yes, like this," and she took my hand and moved it ever so slightly up and down. It was not at all like we shook hands. People usually took each others' hands, gripped them tight and shook them up and down vigorously. And when they wanted to make it more emphatic, they would shake around and around.

"Funny way to shake hands," I said meditatively. I had never known anything like it.

"But it was nice. And he is coming down to see us some evening."

"What for?"

"O, he said he wanted to get acquainted with us. He said he belonged to the church at home, and wanted to get in touch with this one."

"Where is his home?"

"In Sistersville."

"Maybe Hen knows him."

"Why, so he might," said Margaret, springing up suddenly. "Where is Hen?"

"At the store. What do you want?"

"Nothing. Guess I will go back to the house."

That night at supper Hen seemed to remember something.

"What do you think of Brooks Hollingshead?" he asked father.

"A fine, promising young man, I should say," father answered. "Why?"

"Knew him in Sistersville. In school last year. He's a fine fellow."

"Is his home there?" mother asked.

"Yes. I've been there. Fine big house. I didn't know he was here until I stepped into the store."

"How nice that you know him," mother said.

And that evening Brooks Hollingshead came down to see us. Hen was out at the gate when he arrived; and the two talked out there for a long time. I had always thought that Hen was the most handsome man around Barren Rocks, but when I saw him and Brooks Hollingshead together, I was not so sure. Hen was fair, and his hair was a light brown. He had nice eyes, and was big and strong. But Brooks was different. He was not quite as big as Hen, but he was very dark. He had dark eyes, and hair that was almost black. When he laughed he had a way of throwing back his head that was very pleasant. And when he did so, he showed his teeth. They were nice teeth.

When it got dark, Hen brought him into the house. Father had been sitting reading a commentary on Hebrews, but he laid it aside and got up when Brooks came in. Mother shook hands with him also, and said she was glad to have him come down. He looked at her with his pleasant smile, and I could see he was taken. But who wouldn't be—with mother!

Margaret sat over by the reading table and hardly opened her mouth all evening. She had on her green gingham, and I thought she looked very pretty in it. It had white cuffs and a white collar, and the collar made her look very sweet and fresh. When I saw how nice she looked, I hoped she would talk a lot, and do things to draw attention to her. And I was greatly disappointed that she sat there without saying hardly a word. But we did have a very pleasant evening, for all that.

After that, Brooks came down to our house very often. It was very lonely, he said, up at the boarding house, with no one to talk to, and he liked to come down and talk to us. He and Hen were very good friends; had known each other at Sistersville; and found no end of things to talk about.

Father and he also talked a lot. He asked father all sorts of questions about the Bible, and inspiration, and the Second Coming. And in answering him father usually got deadly in earnest. Drawing little diagrams on the floor with his finger, to represent times and periods and ages, he eliminated one after another of the ages that stood from the beginning to the end of time, and narrowed down the number until one only was left. And that was our age. Father was sure the end of the world was close at hand. And he pictured it all out until I felt again the horror of the Judgment Day.

He stopped to explain every big word he used, such as apocalyptic and anthropomorphic, and he did it so well that I understood the whole thing. Brooks listened to him so closely that I wondered at times whether he was not afraid he had sinned away his day of grace. But when I caught him on many occasions looking slyly over at Margaret, I ceased to worry about his salvation.

And then one Sunday evening he walked home with Margaret from church. Not that he went up and asked her, or anything like that. It looked natural enough, for we were all along. But he walked with her, all right, and he took her arm when they came to a rough place in the road. When we reached home he stopped at the gate and said good-night to us all together. But I could see that it was Margaret he meant.

There came quite a change over Margaret. She got up early of a morning, and worked about the house during the day singing little meaningless songs she had learned here and there. She laughed at the least little thing. But usually of an evening she slipped out to the high bank above the river and sat looking off toward Honnells Gap, a dreamy look in her eyes.

But then—well, who wouldn't?

Chapter 18

MY, my, how the time did fly! If I looked back over the months to an event that had taken place somewhere in the past, it seemed ages away. But at the time of its passing, no day was long enough to hold the thousand delights that could have been crowded into it, had there been time. I was worried absolutely not at all. I had no regrets for the past, because it was as I would have had it again. I regretted the passing of each day only because I would fain have had more of it. But I knew there would be another on the morrow, and I lived constantly in present delights and future anticipations.

It was a great life! The lazy summer droned on, with its warm days, when the bumblebees hummed on the sand briers and the river stood blue and still. And the nights were nights of pleasantness and of peace, when the fog hung like eiderdown over the water, the whippoorwills called to each other on the mountainside, and the lightning bugs made dots of yellow light off in the bottoms. And following the summer slowly came golden autumn, when the hoarfrost lay white on the grass, the chestnut burrs curled open and the big brown fat nuts dropped to the ground. Then winter came, and school opened up an entirely new life. After school of evenings there were such myriad things to do—traps to set, deadfalls to go over, rabbits to track up, that no day was sufficient. And even the nights, with great logs burning in the fireplace and chestnuts to roast in the ashes, were never long enough. And spring came on, and summer arrived again, almost before I knew it.

Our school was over; Hen was home for the summer; and I had my first suit of store clothes, before I really stopped to take note of the quickly passing time. It was the suit of clothes that made the epoch, I think. I had for a long time wanted some clothes that were all made up when they left the store. Mother had always made my clothes, and they were all right, of course. But they did not look like the clothes bought at the store. The seams in my pants often puckered in down at the bottom, and my coats were terribly funny up at the collar. I didn't mind it for a long time, but it got to seeming as though I simply must have a suit of store clothes. And one day I saw a golden opportunity. Old Herb Ellanger was rafting his logs down at the mouth of Little Creek, and he wanted a dozen white oak saplings to nail across them. I was at the store when he came in and said what he needed. Five cents a sapling he was willing to pay, and the amount looked fabulous to me. I offered to have them on the creek bank by noon, and hurried home in a fever of delight.

Away back up on the hill I went with our big poleaxe, and cut the saplings we had climbed over for many a summer. The few little limbs were easily cut off, and after the top had been cut out, I dragged the poles in piles of four, butt ends together, and went home after old Bill. With his single harness on, I threw the singletree and snake-chain over my shoulder, and rode him up on the hill. Three trips I made, riding Bill and snaking the saplings down the hill. It was a little after noon when I got the last load down. Old Herb was standing on the bank when I arrived, his great silver watch in his hand.

"It's a little after noon, Ben," he said, his heavy face breaking into a hard smile. "I'll have to dock you five cents on the lot."

"No, but you didn't have to wait any!"

"But you were to have them all here by noon. Here is the fifty-five cents," and he handed me the money.

"But I ought to have sixty," I said angrily.

"That will learn you to keep a contract," and he started off toward the mouth of the creek.

I felt deeply that he had been unjust, but there was nothing that I could do. He had the reputation of driving sharp bargains, and I was afraid if I said anything more he would want to take back some of the fifty-five cents. So I took old Bill home, unharnessed him, and made for the store.

I knew what I wanted. There was a brown suit of clothes there that I had looked at longingly for many a day. I would get it. It cost a dollar and a quarter, but I had hopes of being able to get Brooks Hollingshead to fall in the price some. If he would come down to a dollar, I could pay the fifty-five cents, and get the rest some way.

"I would like to see that brown suit over there, Brooks," I said eagerly, pointing to it.

When he had laid it on the counter I felt of it, and my hands were very nervous. It seemed more desirable than ever, now that it looked as though I really could get it, but I shrank from asking him the price, and then asking him to credit me for the amount above fifty-five cents.

"How much is it?" I asked nervously.

"One dollar and a quarter," he said in a business-like way.

"Could you come down on it some?"

"I'll tell you, Ben. I'll make it to you for one dollar, cash."

My heart sank. Cash meant all the money down, and I didn't have all.

"I'll pay you fifty-five cents down and the rest some time soon," I offered, not very confidently.

"Does your father know you are getting it?"

"No."

"Where will you get the money to pay the balance?"

"I'll get it somewhere," I said fiercely.

He laughed.

"All right. Take it."

I counted out the fifty-five cents carefully, and then my fingers closed over the suit. Holding it in my arms I started for the door.

"Don't you want it wrapped up, Ben?"

I didn't answer. I was afraid to let it out of my hands. It seemed I might never get hold of it again if I let go of it for a moment. I ran all the way home, rushed in, and showed it to mother.

She seemed sufficiently impressed. She took it from me, ran her fingers in the coat sleeve, and looked at the cloth critically, then held it up to the light.

"Where did you get it, son?" she inquired.

"At the store. I hauled some poles for Herb Ellanger's raft, and he paid me fifty-five cents for them. The suit cost a dollar. I owe forty-five cents on it yet, but I can get that somewhere."

"Try it on, and let me see how it will fit."

That was precisely what I wanted to do, and I was not slow in doing it. My, how it did fit! The seams of the pants were straight, and the legs were pressed neatly. The coat fit perfectly, and I liked the smell of the cloth. It had a strange smell, different from any clothes I had ever worn.

Sunday had always been a day more to be dreaded than desired by me, for while I liked to go to church and see everybody, there were so many things we could not do on Sunday that we had to be very careful. But now I wanted Sunday to come, and come quickly, so I could wear my new suit.

Essie Evans was always there, her curly hair falling down round her shoulders, neat and nice as ever, although much taller than she used to be. And while she was always friendly with me, I thought she liked to go about with Tim Tahune too much since he had got his new store suit. She had told me she didn't like Tim, but he did look fine in his new suit, and she would go down to the spring with him before Sunday School, almost every Sunday. I went along, but someway Tim seemed to amount to more than I did.

And this Sunday I was to wear my new suit. I knew just how I would fix myself. I would wash my feet and legs good, wash my neck, and comb my hair up in a high roach that I thought made me look much like Brooks Hollingshead.

Very early Sunday morning I started out. When I went by Tim Tahune's, he was out in the yard washing his face.

"Early, ain't you, Ben?"

"Not much," I said, extremely self-conscious as he looked me over.

"Say, where did that come from?" he asked seriously, giving a finishing touch to his face with the towel, and coming over to inspect me closely.

"Bought it at the store," I said, with an effort to be careless.

"Looks all right," he conceded heartily when he had finished.

His frank admiration was hugely gratifying, and when he expressed it so frankly, I was inwardly ashamed of the envy and jealousy I had so often directed at him. But I didn't say so.

"How soon will you be ready to go?" I asked him.

"Haven't fed the horses yet. I won't be ready for near an hour."

"Guess I'll go on, then."

When I got in sight of the church I saw a lot of the girls playing out in front. People got to church early in Barren Rocks, sometimes an hour or more before the service would begin. And after it was over, they would stay and visit until far into the afternoon.

When I was near I saw the girls stop and look toward me. I was a little uncertain just how I should walk in order to appear at my best. All the way to the meeting-house I had been practising a stride that would suit me best, and had finally decided on one, but I was still a little uncertain about it. I had concluded that it wouldn't be best to walk along easily, swinging my arms like I usually did. That would look too frivolous. So I had decided to walk slowly, with measured step, my arms hanging gracefully at my sides. And when I walked I was to lean forward slightly at each step, as a clerk that used to be at the store had done.

In this measured dignified manner I approached the meeting-house. I looked for Essie Evans to run out to meet me and declare that she would like for me to be her partner in the games that we were to play. But she did nothing of the kind. The girls simply stood and looked at me a moment, as though uncertain who I might be. Then one called out,

"O, it's Ben Rhodes," and they all ran away together to play.

I was greatly chagrined, but did not entirely give up hope. I would just wait until the other boys came, and when the girls saw us all together, I was sure they would be impressed.

But when Tim Tahune arrived, he wore, in addition to his suit, which looked unusually neat, a beautiful pair of tan shoes. Now I had no shoes. I had always gone barefooted in the summer time, and had worn boots in the winter. None of us boys had ever thought shoes an essential thing in the summer. For girls they might do, but as for us, we had no need of them. But although I would have been glad to think otherwise, I had to admit that Tim's shoes looked not at all out of place. Rather, his stockings matched his pants so nicely, that he seemed more finished and complete—more like the pictures in the Journal and Messenger—than I did. And when we started over to the spring to get some water, Essie Evans went with him.

I did not go clear to the spring. There seemed no room for me in the crowd. Rather, in a brooding frame of mind, I went back to the meeting-house, and sat down on the steps. I wanted to think things out. The one thing that would admit of no compromise was that I must have a pair of shoes. But how to get them? That was the question with which I wrestled all during the service, and all the way home.

But that afternoon all such thoughts were banished from my mind. We had no more than finished dinner when Brooks Hollingshead arrived. He came in cheerily and sat down by the window.

"What do you say to going for some birch?" was almost his first question.

"Nothing would suit me better," Hen declared.

"Won't that be fun," Margaret said. "We will go over toward Honnells Gap. There are ever so many big birches over that way."

Now, that suited me as well as it did any of them.

To go out in the woods and cut down a young birch tree, peel off the bark in big pieces, and with a sharp spoon, scrape off the sweet sap and eat it—that was about as fine a thing as could be done.

I had already taken off my suit and put on my old clothes, and while Margaret went out to the kitchen to get some spoons to scrape the sap with, I went out to get the poleaxe.

Hen put on his hat and went out. When I returned with the axe he was not to be seen, and it was a long time before he came back. Jane was with him when he did.

And when we started off up the bottom, Brooks walked easily along beside Margaret. Hen and Jane were in front of them, and I walked importantly along ahead of them all.

The afternoon was glorious. We climbed the hill above our house, and the laurel bushes were freighted down with immense big white and pink flowers. Mountain-tea, with its little green leaves and red berries, grew along the ground like a carpet. And when we got on top of the hill we looked off over one chain of hills after another, into the far distance where the blue of the hills seemed to meet the blue of the sky. And I thought as I had often thought before, that out there was the end of the world.

We climbed down the hill on the opposite side, down into the deep moist hollow, where the leaves had been gathering for years and the sun seldom shone. We had all reached the bottom, and I was exploring around on all sides when I found my big patch of sang. Sang we all called it, but father had often explained that the real word was ginseng. Ginseng or sang, I had found a big patch of it, and my heart leaped with the possibilities it offered.

I said no word to the others, but let them go on, while I hastily cut a limb from a bush and sharpening the end of it, began feverishly to dig. It was not long before I heard the resounding strokes of the axe on the mountainside, but I paid no heed. On and on I dug until my pockets were full and bulging with the stringy uneven brown roots. It was only after the last root was dug, and I had looked carefully around for more, that I started toward the direction of the sound of the axe.

The little slim birch tree fell, and we peeled off great strips of the tough bark and scraped the white juicy sap out of the hollow troughs with our spoons. I ate all I wanted, and then began to scrape the sap out in long strips and plat them together to take home and dry. It was very good dried.

It was while we were on our way home, laughing, chattering, telling funny stories and having a great good time, that it dawned on me with a suddenness very surprising, that Margaret had grown up. I had not really thought much about her, except simply as Margaret, since the winter day a few years before when she stood looking meditatively out of the window. I had thought somewhat hazily then that she had changed, but I had thought nothing more about it. But to-day she seemed like a different Margaret from the one I had always known. Father had called her a tomboy when she was growing up; and later he had said she spent too much time moping about when she ought to be helping mother. But it struck me as we all walked home together that Margaret was not at all like she used to be. Her hair did not hang down her back in a big plat, for one thing. But that was not it. She had been putting it up on her head for a long time, and it didn't seem to make much difference. The skirts she wore were longer. The blue one she had on to-day came to her shoe tops.

But it was something more subtle than these, and yet it was all very contradictory. She seemed frailer than she used to be, but she was not. There was something soft and appealing about her, but she was as jolly and sharp-witted as anybody.

She stood up on the trunk of a great oak tree that had fallen so long ago that it was rotting away, and tiptoed up to look into a bird's nest that was slung jauntily to an overhanging bough. And as she stood there, graceful, charming, with an evasive resemblance to mother in the way she arched her head and smiled, I thought, as I had thought once before, that she looked like some nimble graceful elfin poised for flight.

All at once I felt very, very lonely. It was as though Margaret had moved on into another world and had left me to wander behind. And I knew, as I had known so many things before, not because I had been told or had any assurance from without that they were so, but simply because I knew from within that they were—in this way I knew that Margaret and I would never again be the great companions we had been. She had passed beyond me, and whither she had gone I could not follow. Then and there I gave her up, and it was with more regret than was the case when I said good-bye to Hen as he left to go to school, for I knew he would come back, but I knew equally well that Margaret would never return.

But when I put my hand into my pocket to get my knife, all thoughts of a gloomy nature vanished before the fact that I had in that selfsame pocket enough sang to pay the balance on my suit and go a long way toward buying a pair of shoes. I thought happily of the shoes. They should be tan, not like Tim's, for that would look as though I had picked shoes like he had. They should be darker than his, and the soles should be a little thinner. And I ran home to spread my sang out to dry.

After a week of impatient waiting for it to dry, I took it eagerly up to the store. My shoes would be a dollar and a half, and I owed forty-five cents on my suit. That meant a dollar and ninety-five cents in all, and I hoped ardently that the sang would bring that amount, for I knew it sold for four dollars a pound.

It came to a dollar and seventeen cents. I hung around the scales while it was being weighed, and haggled with Brooks for a few more cents, but he was obdurate. A dollar seventeen was all he would give, and while I was disappointed, I asked him if he would give me the two cents' worth of candy, and allow me to pay the rest on a pair of shoes. He looked at me quizzically and said he guessed he would risk it. And carrying the coveted shoes, I went home at a dead run.

And the following Sunday I went straight up to Essie and asked her to go down to the spring with me after water. She looked at me with her brightest smile.

"Come on, Ben. We will run away from that Tim Tahune."

I was perfectly willing to run away from him, not that I feared him, for I believed that with my new suit and shoes I did not need to fear any one. But I was glad to take Essie down over the big bank, where we were out and away from the others.

We had a glorious time. I pulled a big leaf off of a little oak sprout and made a cup for her to drink out of. She held it daintily out from her as she drank, and her beautiful curls fell down around her shoulders.

"Is it all right, honey?" I asked her.

My new shoes had given me a confidence and a boldness I had never known before. I felt equal to any emergency.

She looked at me an instant, as though she were preparing to be very angry. My heart thumped against my ribs while she was hesitating. But she evidently thought better of it. She smiled, and a little dimple showed itself in her right cheek, and her dark eyes held a look of great companionship.

"Yes, dear," she said, softly.

She started rather quickly up the bank, and I followed, trying to catch up with her. She slowed down when we got near the church, and together we went inside.

I just felt that after that I could go with her any time.

Chapter 19

UNCLE CHARLES SHAUDER was mother's brother. He was a very large man, very fat and cheerful. I liked very much for him to come to visit us, for he was so big and happy that he made us all have a good time. He never had the blues, and when he got up of a morning he roared out some funny greeting to each one of us as we appeared, and started the day off with such funny jokes and so much laughter that we forgot all about having the blues.

He was a minister, too, only he was a Methodist. Mother had been a Methodist before her marriage, but when she married father she joined the Baptist church, for father said it would never do for a minister's own household to be divided. But Uncle Charles was a Methodist, and I had early promised him that I would be one too when I grew up, for I thought if all Methodists were big and cheerful like him, it surely would be a jolly church to belong to.

Uncle Charles was always trying to persuade father to join the Methodist church. He said father was such a big preacher that he would soon be made a Presiding Elder if he were a Methodist; and he further declared that he ought to get out of the woods and go somewhere where he would be appreciated. Father had always said that he simply could not consider such a thing, and the subject was dropped.

But once Uncle Charles came to see him about a very important matter. They went on a long walk, and talked seriously all the way. I went along with them, but father told me to run ahead and play, so I did not hear what they said. But that evening I came on father and mother in the kitchen alone. They were talking very seriously, and looked exceedingly solemn.

"He said all was arranged," he was saying, "and that I could be assigned to it right away. It is a big church, a station right in the city."

"Would you be contented there, dear?" mother asked, softly.

Father looked troubled. He walked up and down the room a long time.

"I don't know," he said finally.

"You know, dear," mother went on, still softly, "the size of the church isn't everything. And neither is the money. You could get more money here if you should ask for it."

"O, I know. But it is not so much that, Anne. It's the children. They are growing up, and maybe they ought to have the advantages of the city."

"We will go if you think best, dear. But our children are all I want. We have been greatly blessed with them all."

"That's all true. But conditions are changing. We must fix it so they can take their place in the world."

"And what of the churches here?"

Father again looked troubled. He sat down in a chair and laid his head over on the table.

"I don't know," he said simply.

"When do you have to decide?"

"Before he goes back."

"That gives us a week. We will decide one way or another by that time."

And they decided on a plan. Father should visit the four churches of the circuit; talk with the members about the matter, and if they seemed willing to consider a change, we should move.

It was a busy week for him. He spent a day among the members at the River appointment, and came home looking more troubled than ever. He next rode over to Oakum Mills, spent two days, and again returned with a haggard look about his eyes. Then he went to the Shoals, and finally visited around among the people at Barren Rocks.

"Well, what have you decided?" mother asked him, smiling wanly, when he had finished.

"I have not decided."

"But there are only two days more. You must decide."

"I suppose I must."

But he wandered vacantly about the house that evening, as if vainly endeavouring to make up his mind. Uncle Charles pressed him for an answer.

"Don't be so squeamish about it, Peter. The time has come in this day when a man must grasp his opportunities as they come to him. And a big thing like this does not turn up every day."

"But what about the churches here?"

"Why, let them go. You can't afford to spend your whole life cooped up here. You are getting old, man. And these people can find another man that can take your place."

"I suppose so. Well, I'll let you know before you go back."

It was about eleven o'clock the next morning that a member of the River appointment rode slowly down the bottom, and hitched his horse to the fence. Soon there was another, and still others, until six men from the River had arrived. They hitched their horses to the fence and stood awkwardly about.

And then from up over the hill, they began to arrive from Oakum Mills. Tall silent men, slouched down in the saddle, their white cotton socks showing above their heavy shoes where their pants had been worked up by the stirrup strap. They came down the hill, hitched their horses to the fence, and joined the others.

Men from the Shoals also came, some riding, some coming in a boat. And then people who lived around Barren Rocks: Henry Tolliver, Herb Ellanger, and many more.

We were greatly mystified at their appearance. It was not a surprise party, for there were no women along. And there was something so serious in the way they came up and stood around, that I knew they had come on important business.

Father joined the group, and tried his best to talk with the men, but they were not talkative. Clearly they had something on their minds, and were in no mood for conversation until it was off.

When there were no others in sight, and it was clear that all had come who were to be there, they came through the gate and stood in an uneven circle about our front door. Mother stood in the doorway watching them; father came up and sat down on the step.

Henry Tolliver disengaged himself from the others, and walked well over to the centre of the circle. He faced father.

"Brother Rhodes," he began in his mild way, glancing first at father and then at the silent group that stood about, "we hear that you have got a call to leave us. That is, you told us about it when you visited with us. We have been expectin' this. We all knowed that you would some day be took from us. But we had our hopes. That is, we thought maybe—we thought as how you might stay. And we don't want you to go. We will pay ye more. We will see that ye never want. But it ain't that. A lot of these here," and he waved his hand to include the circle, "a lot of these here have been converted under your preachin'. Ye have married us and baptised us, and," his voice shook and he hesitated feebly, "and ye have buried a lot more as would like to be here, but could not because God took 'em. And Brother Rhodes, we have come down to see whether you won't stay on with us."

He walked over and joined the circle. The men looked patient, serious, troubled. There was about it all an undercurrent of deep emotion. All eyes were fixed on father.

I had never seen father cry but once, and that was when the Doctor said mother could not live. He had gone into the little storage room to pray. He cried then. But now his eyes grew very misty. He looked up at mother, who all the time had been standing in the doorway. She nodded to him, and stepped down beside him.

He stood up, looked into the faces before him, smiled, and opened his mouth to speak. He closed it and swallowed hard. Then he sat back down on the step and buried his face in his hands.

There was a movement in the group about him. Some cleared their throats noisily, others turned their faces away. Tears were in many eyes. Slowly the group melted away. Horses were unhitched, men vaulted into the saddle, and soon we were alone.

Mother sat down beside father, and put her hand in his.

"Tommy, the Lord has spoken."

He looked up at her. His eyes were wet, but his face shone with a great light. He pressed her hand.

"The Lord has spoken," he said.

And I knew then, just as I knew so many things without being told, that we should always live at Barren Rocks. But I was not sorry. I never wanted to leave.

But when Hen heard what had happened, he was furious. He said it was wrong to let big opportunities slip by; that with a big church there were greater opportunities; and that father might not have another chance to go out into the world and really count. Uncle Charles agreed with Hen, I knew, although he never said a word. Only as he was leaving, he turned to speak to father.

"I guess it is settled, is it?"

"It is settled, Charles," father replied.

When I asked Margaret what she thought about it, she smiled.

Uncle Charles was not married, and he was going to see his girl on his way back. It seemed very funny to hear Uncle Charles talking about going to see his girl. Of course, he was not so very old, but his being so big and fat made it seem almost comical to hear him talk about a girl.

Her name was Amy Dedson, and she lived about twenty-five miles down the river from our house. Uncle Charles had to go by there on his way back to Midvale, where his church was, and he was to stop a day or two.

From the excited way in which he and mother had talked of the visit, something very important evidently hinged on it. They were out under the chestnut tree the day before he left.

"And you think she is willing?" mother asked excitedly.

"I don't know, Sis," he responded gloomily. "I don't seem able to worm a thing out of her. She is so confounded elusive."

"But you——"

"Sure. But then it is hard to tell. But one thing sure, I'm going to have it out with her this time."

"And do let me know the minute you find out," mother made him promise.

And from the eagerness with which she watched for the mail for the first few days after he left, I surmised that something important was afoot.

It was almost a week after he left us that mother got the letter. She flew at it with great eagerness, and tore it open instantly. She read it through once, then went back over it and read it again.

Father had been regarding her with a tolerant smile. "Well, did she have him?" he grinned.

Mother did not read it all out loud, but she read this:

And, Sis, I popped the all-important question! It staggered her for a bit. I guess I talked so fast and looked so wild that she was afraid I would fall on her. But in the end she accepted yours truly, and everything went off with a flourish. The date is set for the twentieth, for I could see no need for delay. All we need now is the assurance that good old Peter will be on hand to do the job.

Mother got all worked up over it, and made endless preparations. The wedding was to be at Amy's home, twenty-five miles down the river. Father and mother were to start the nineteenth so as to be there in good time. My, the way she did fix for it. Of course she would need but two dresses, the one she should ride down in and the one she should wear at the ceremony. But I do believe she made over every dress she had.

But on the sixteenth it began to rain. And on the seventeenth, it fairly poured. And by the nineteenth, Elk River was a yellow flood. It raced past our house like mad, high and swift in the centre, with a constant stream of driftwood swirling down it. And it was impossible for mother to go. For the road was terrible in good weather, crossing the river in many places. While at high tide there was no other way than to let the horse wade as far out as he could at the fords, and swim the rest of the way across.

Mother had to stay at home. She was more vexed than ever I had seen her before. She stood at the window biting her lip and watching the muddy flood sweep by.

"I NEVER wanted to go anywhere that something didn't turn up," she declared tearfully. "I might have known it."

And when father was ready to start she gave him his marching orders in a firm voice.

"Now, Tommy, you notice everything. EVERYTHING," she repeated impressively, shaking her finger at him. "Don't miss ANYTHING. And remember it all, too. And come back here and tell me all about it."

He promised solemnly to do so.

"Now remember," she warned him as he rode away.

He was back in record time, and she flew to the door to meet him.

"Well, how did she look?" was her first question.

"Now, Anne, just wait a minute till I get these things off," and he began to unfasten his long leggings. It took him a long time.

Mother stood by impatiently.

"Was the house decorated?" she asked when she could restrain herself no longer.

"House? What house? Why, let me see. 'Pon my word, I forget whether it was or not."

"I knew it," mother cried, greatly exasperated. "Do you remember ANYTHING?"

"I had to use that Methodist ritual, after all," father declared in a tone that made it all too clear that the ceremony would have been much more satisfactorily performed had he used the Baptist formula.

"O, that! But Amy. How was she dressed?"

"I didn't just notice what she had on, but really she is a sight."

Mother was all interest.

"A sight? What do you mean?"

"Well, she is long and lean. Flat as a board. And she has a long red nose."

"Really?" mother encouraged.

"Fact. Red as a beet." Father was evidently enjoying himself.

"I can hardly believe it. Tell me more about her."

"Well, she is taller than Charles, and walks like this."

Father bent over and made his way awkwardly across the room.

"Go on. Tell me everything."

And then father went on to tell everything. The trip he had had down the river; the fords Bill had swum; the mud. And always he returned to the Methodist ritual. That had evidently aggravated him more than anything else, for he made constant reference to it. And Amy—he took great delight in telling just how she had looked.

It all interested me very much. When mother got a letter from Uncle Charles not so many weeks later, saying that he and Amy were coming up for a visit, I was filled with curiosity to see his new wife. Mother was too, for she went all over the house and gave it a good cleaning.

But when the day arrived, Uncle Charles came alone. His wife's home was between our house and Midvale, and she had stopped there while he had come on up. We were greatly disappointed.

That night we were all sitting comfortably around the table. Uncle Charles, in his big cheerful way, had been telling us of his trip, of the church, and last of all, of his wife. He ended abruptly and called me over to him.

"Come over and sit beside me, Ben."

I went over. It was fine to be around Uncle Charles. He put his arm across my shoulder and pulled me close to him.

"And what do you think of my wife?" he asked.

"I never saw her, Uncle Charles."

"But what did your daddy say about her?"

"I won't tell," I answered quickly.

I realised that complications of some terrible sort were imminent. But when he spoke again his voice was friendly, and I took courage.

"Sure you will tell me. Now what did he say?"

I was reassured by the tone of his voice, for if he meant to take it all so goodnaturedly, there could be no danger in telling him. Besides, I saw no way out of the difficulty.

"Now what was it?"

"He said she was tall and lean."

He looked around quickly.

"Was that all?"

"And had a long red nose," I went on.

"And then?"

Now I just felt that there was something wrong. I felt it in the air, something ominous, terrible. I looked up. Margaret sat looking at me as if fascinated, absorbingly interested. Mother's glance was shifting feverishly from me to father and back again. And father's glance was bent upon me in a cold frown. It was his eye that fairly froze my blood. I stopped speaking abruptly, got up and slunk out to the kitchen.

I expected something awful to happen when I saw father alone, but he never said a word.

When Uncle Charles went back, father and mother went with him part way. They intended to go part way with him, and then turn off for a visit to their own people over around Big Bend. They took Little Anne with them and left Margaret and me at home. Rude Hamilton was to stay with us and keep house while they were away.

Rude had a pretty hard time of it at home, alone so much. For a long time after Thomas was baptised, he had kept pretty close home. But he had developed some new interests down the river, and they kept him away quite a bit of the time. He never came back drunk any more. He very rarely came back at all. And Rude was that lonesome, she was always glad to stay with us any time we needed her. So she came over to keep house for Margaret and me while father and mother were away.

It was along about that time that I developed a great tendency for bartering. I wanted to trade, and it made little difference what the object was, just so a trade could be made. I just loved to dicker over a bargain, and so heckle the other party that I would come out ahead. I had originally started with a large barlow knife, and had traded it for arrowheads, cartridges, horseshoe nails, and finally ended up with a fine jew's-harp. Anything that I had I stood perfectly willing to barter away, provided I stood a good chance of disposing of it at its true value.

And then there was another thing. In the Journal and Messenger from time to time there were advertisements from big stores out in the world, offering fine prizes to any one who would sell certain articles for them. In some cases they allowed the agent to keep back part of the money received from the sale of the articles as a commission for the work.

I was not long in sensing the opportunities offered by these concerns, and I soon sent off for their wares. Once I got a package of gold nugget stick pins, claimed to have been secured directly from the Klondyke. I filed into one to test its genuineness, and discovered that it was brass clear through. But the things were so heavy, and looked so much like pure gold that I had little difficulty in selling them. In fact, when I wore one out to church one Sunday, all the boys were wild about them, and the money just poured in for a few days after that. Some one told father that I was outside selling nuggets while he was preaching, and I got an awful talking to about it. But the nuggets sold, just the same. I kept part of the receipts as my commission, sending the balance in to the Company. And the success fired my ambitions.

I got some salve, and had but little trouble dispensing with it. All the boys went barefooted in the summer, and they got so many stone bruises on their feet, that their mothers were only too glad to have some good remedy handy. And when I discovered that stone bruises were the chief affliction, I played up that part in great shape.

My being a minister's son helped a lot. The people hated to say anything mean to me, for they knew it would get to father in time, and they all wanted him to think they were perfect. So more than once they bought the salve just for the effect it might have on father. And then, too, when they simply could not buy it, they were so nice about it that I didn't really mind.

But when the other boys saw what a harvest I was making, they sent away for things also, and the market was fairly glutted. Sometimes three boys went to the same house in one day. This spoiled it all for me. And it was at a very unfortunate time, for I had just got in a large supply of bluing. Twenty-four packages, to sell at ten cents a package, and the market glutted! It was good bluing, coated on little squares of paper. I had been sent a sample package with which to demonstrate its value, and it certainly worked wonders, but it would not sell. I was desperate, for the company was nagging me for returns, but the case seemed absolutely hopeless.

I was in this desperate condition when Brooks Hollingshead came to see Margaret. For he had got to coming to see her regularly, whether there happened to be anything to go to or not. When he came down on this particular night, Margaret was not just ready to see him, and I staid in the room to entertain him while she fixed up. We couldn't think of very much to say, so in a lull I went out and got my bluing. I got a little cup of water also, to use in demonstrating the bluing to him. I went back in where he was.

"I have something here I want to show you, Brooks."

He looked up, very much interested.

"What is it, Ben?"

"It's bluing. See how it works," and I dipped a corner of the sample in the water. As soon as it touched the surface, little blue streaks began to spread out in the water. In a very little bit the whole cup was blue.

"See how good it does the work?" I asked him.

"It surely does," he answered enthusiastically.

"See, it comes in these little packages," and I held one up. "There are ten sheets to the package, and half of one sheet is plenty for a big washing."

"That surely is fine. Where did you get them?"

"Sent off for them. I am selling them."

"You ought to be able to sell them, all right."

I didn't want to say that I could not sell them, for fear he would think the bluing was no good. So I said:

"Maybe you would want a package, Brooks."

"Me? No, I don't have any use for it." And he laughed.

"But you could send it home," I argued.

It was at this rather awkward time that Margaret came in. Brooks got up quickly, and advanced to meet her.

"Good evening, Brooks," she said softly.

"Good evening, Margaret," and he took her hand.

She sat down, and he followed her example. They started up a rather brisk conversation, entirely ignoring me. I was greatly vexed that Margaret had come in just when she did, for I thought Brooks was beginning to yield when she broke in on us. I waited and waited for a good time to interrupt and reopen negotiations, but there seemed absolutely no occasion. I sat on and on. At last there was a lull, and Brooks looked over at me curiously.

I saw my opening.

"You see, Brooks, you might send it home as a present."

"O, the bluing," and he laughed wanly. "How much did you say it was?"

"Ten cents a package."

He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a quarter.

"I don't seem to have any change, Ben. Maybe if you will go up to the store and get this changed, I will take two packages."

"Is there anybody there now?"

"Yes, somebody always stays when I am not there."

My fingers closed over the quarter and I started eagerly up. I looked back at Brooks as I went out the door. He was looking toward the lamp, a slight smile on his face.

And by demonstrating the bluing to him time and again, I succeeded in selling him the whole lot. I did think along toward the end that he was getting too much. For, as the women said where I had tried to sell it, a little bluing went a long way. But I didn't say anything. And anyway, his mother got good value, for it was good bluing.

Chapter 20

FATHER and mother were to be gone three weeks, and I had planned for a solid holiday covering the whole period. For when they were away, I did just about as I pleased.

Not long before they went away, we had papered our living room. Now, we never used regular wall paper, such as old Harrison Applebee used, when we papered our house. When we papered our house, we made the paste out of flour, and used the back numbers of the Journal and Messenger for wall paper.

For this reason it was a very interesting thing to go around a room after it had been papered, looking at the pictures. Not the ones we purposely hung up, but the ones on the wall paper. In the room where I slept there were any number of such pictures; one, in particular, that I looked at almost every day. A big grouchy looking man was the principal figure in it. He was bent far forward, and behind him was a wheel. From the wheel big boots stuck out, and their soles were full of sharp tacks. The wheel was supposed to be revolving rapidly, and as it did so, the boots kicked the old man hard. Below it was written, "Kicking himself for not using schnapps tobacco."

So when we papered a room, it was a fascinating thing to go around and look at the new pictures on the walls. It took weeks to see them all and know what was written under each one.

After father and mother left, and things were pretty still about the house, I spent many hours walking around and looking at the new pictures. And it was the second or third day after they went away that I found the exciting one. It was almost entirely in red. A reddish man was standing on a porch, holding out a beautiful rifle to a boy who was running wildly toward him. There was a little loop out from the man's mouth, and in it, "Take this, son, and keep your eye steady." It was a full page picture, of wonderful attractiveness. Below and at the sides were little inserts of guns of various types, with prices printed beneath them. I thought it was the most wonderful picture I had ever seen, and I looked at it by the solid hour. I tried to imagine how it would feel to get hold of such a gun, to carry it on my shoulder, and to go hunting with a gun all my own, and watch for squirrels and rabbits when I had some chance of shooting them myself.

The picture was on the wall behind father's bed, and I was lying across the bed looking at it, when father and mother themselves arrived, a day sooner than we had expected.

The first intimation I had of their arrival was when father called out to me:

"Come here, Ben, quick."

I sprang from the bed and hurried out. Margaret had heard them too, and came running in from the kitchen. I knew by father's voice that there was something unusual on foot. He didn't call to me in that vibrating way when I was merely to put up the horses. So I ran out, my eyes searching them as I ran.

"Look here, Ben, what I've got," father yelled.

I saw it, and simply could not get my breath for a long time. It was a rifle, a twenty-two, a breech-loader, octagon-barrelled, and the stock was glistening oak, varnished until it shone. My knees got so weak I thought they would just crumple up beneath me, and for a moment I could not lift up my arm to get it. I just stood weakly and stared. It was too good to be true, and coming as it did after I had been looking for so long at the picture on the wall, it seemed like some impossible ending of a beautiful dream. Father's voice recalled me.

"Here, Ben. Come and get it. It's yours."

I cleared the distance between us at one bound, grabbed the gun out of his hand and hugged it. I pulled back the hammer and sprung the little lever that ejected the shells. I held it off from me and gazed at it, and put it to my shoulder and sighted out over the bead. I was almost delirious. Again father's voice brought me back to earth.

"Where is Henry, Ben? Take it and show it to him."

I whirled on Margaret.

"Here, Margaret. Take it. I'll go and get Hen."

He was at the store, and I started off on a run. I never once stopped until I reached the store. I found Hen outside making darts out of pine boards. I ran up to him and clutched him eagerly.

"Come home, Hen. They have come back, and brought a gun," and I broke toward home as hard as I could go.

Hen followed, but a little more slowly. I got there a little ahead of him, ran in and got the gun and met him.

"Here it is. See the hammer, and here is the way the shells are thrown out," and I showed him.

"Well, don't go clear crazy, Ben. Let me have it."

He took it, and I at once felt greatly ashamed of myself. I tried to breathe normally, and stiffened up in the hope that my heart would not pound so furiously against my ribs. I could see it beat, and flutter my shirt as it did it. I hoped Hen would not notice it.

And that night I slept with the gun hugged tightly up to me.

After that, my days were one wild delight. Long before the fog lifted off the mountains of a morning I was there, haunting the beech and the hickory, watching for squirrels. And as they began to stir, and jump from bough to bough with the heavy dew splattering down on the leaves beneath, I was on hand. The gun was not meant for long-distance shooting, and more shots went wild than hit the mark, but the excitement never abated, nor did the joy decrease. And in the evening during the long twilight and until after dusk, I dogged the rabbits through the fields, whistling when they ran, creeping up on them when they stopped. While here also more shots were wasted than true, it was more for the joy of the chase than for the material reward.

So absorbed was I that Hen had gone away for his last year in school, our own school had taken up, and golden October had arrived, before I marvelled at the passing of time.

We had all been invited to an apple-cutting at Harrison Applebee's, and Rude Hamilton had come over to talk it over with mother.

"I do think," she was saying, "that with all his money, old Harrison Applebee would cut his own apples and not have the neighbours come in and do it for him. But that's the way with the rich. As soon as they get a little they want the world."

"O, but they do it merely to have a good time," mother protested.

"I know that's what they say. But you know, Sister Rhodes, them young people waste more apples than they cut. And they never take any pains with 'em."

"But we must have something going on for the young people."

"Why don't they come to church?" she snapped.

"They do, mostly," said mother uneasily.

"And what do they come for? Not for worship, but merely to gad around together."

"We were all young once," mother replied easily.

"I don't think the wicked and indifferent need to have any excuse made for 'em, Sister," and Rude looked very severe.

"O, no. Maybe not. How is your toothache lately?" Thus the subject was turned.

Margaret and I were ready to start before Brooks got to our house. Mother had torn up her pink dress that father got her at the Association, and had made it over for Margaret. Mother said she was afraid to ride in it, anyway, for if she got mud on it it would be ruined, so she would just make Margaret a pretty dress out of it. It was pretty, very soft and clinging. And Margaret looked pretty with it on. Her face was pink to match it, and to-night there seemed to be more of a flush on it than usual. She sat with her hands in her lap, her fingers holding a small square of a handkerchief she had not yet unfolded. When there was a knock on the door she got up all flushed, and started to open it. Mother intercepted her, and putting her hands on Margaret's shoulders, looked searchingly into her eyes. Margaret smiled uncertainly, and Mother kissed her. Then Margaret opened the door and stepped out.

We three walked along together for perhaps half the way. Then Brooks spoke to me.

"You be the scout of the party, Ben, and travel on ahead and let us know if there are any trees across the road, or mud puddles or things like that."

The idea appealed to me strongly, and I strode importantly ahead. I looked sharply for trees across the road, for overhanging branches that might be dangerous, and for treacherous places in the road. Clear up to the house I piloted them. I had found nothing.

"Didn't find a thing, Brooks," I said disappointedly.

"You looked all right, though. If there had been anything you would have found it."

"You bet I would."

We went into the house. A number had got there before us, and they all called out cheerily as we went in. In the centre of the living room there was a great pile of red apples, and when I went into the parlour I found the same thing there. We were to peel all these, take the cores out and quarter them, and finally, with needle and thread, string them on strings about a yard long, so they could be hung up to dry. They were usually hung to the rafters in the kitchen, and along in the winter they would be cooked as dried apples.

All the young people for miles around were there, and after we got started with the apples it was great fun. The peelings were put in big dish pans, and the quarters were put in water buckets until time for stringing. We had a big time. We talked and laughed, and one would slip some of his unpeeled apples over to another, and when the trick was discovered there would follow a great argument. Cores were thrown about the room; peelings were hung up in garlands; and every one was privileged to eat any good apples that might be found in the lot.

Old Harrison Applebee sat over in one corner, looking on at everything. He wore a broad grin, and seemed to take delight in everything that went on about him. His wife sat with him most of the time, but when there was need of more pans or buckets, or when some that had been brought in needed to be emptied, she flew about rapidly, keen to see that the work was put through.

After all the apples were peeled and quartered and strung, we moved into the parlour. The floor was cleared, and the chairs put back against the wall. And then the real fun began.

We started with the Virginia Reel, and ended up with the Needle's Eye. We usually began with the Virginia Reel, for as a thing to get up real enthusiasm right off, it cannot be beat. For one thing, everybody knew it, and there had to be no explanations. And there was so much movement in it, such a good chance for pairing off, that we always welcomed it.

But the most exciting was Needle's Eye. It was exciting because it kept us all guessing. Who would be caught while going through the needle's eye, and whom would she kiss, after she was caught? For in Needle's Eye a boy and a girl made an arch by facing each other and holding hands above their heads. We all caught hands, and filed through the needle's eye in a circle. And if the needle's eye should close on a girl while she was passing through it, she had to kneel, and as we sang, "As you rise, do confess, kiss the one that you love best," she got up and kissed the boy she loved best. Or, if it were a boy, he had to kiss the girl he loved best.

I liked it best of all, for it gave me a chance to find out just what girl each boy was in love with. And it surely was a dead give away to the girls.

We were all filing through the needle's eye, and I was watching to see it come down. I was really hoping that I might be caught, for I had my mind all made up. But it did not come down on me, although I looked up hopefully about every time I went through.

It came down first on Henrietta McRand. Henrietta had grown a lot the past year or two, but she had grown in both directions. She had got pretty tall, but she was also very broad. She was very fat, especially her neck, for it always bulged out behind. When the arch came down on her, she kneeled meekly while we finished singing. As she knelt she folded her hands as if in prayer, and her neck was a broad expanse as she inclined her head forward. When the arch was lifted she arose, glanced defiantly around the room until she located Brooks, and walked over and gave him a good big kiss. We all laughed, but she joined the circle and started on around. Twice afterward she was caught, and, as if her mind were entirely made up, she did the very same thing. It tickled us very much, but Brooks looked very uncomfortable.

I was amazed at the duplicity of Margaret. Now, I just knew that she thought the world of Brooks. And I supposed, of course, that when she was caught she would go to him immediately. But instead, she walked over and kissed Herb Ellanger on the cheek. He was the only one who did not see the fun in it, for he blushed miserably.

It was after midnight when we started back home. I again set out as guide for Brooks, for the idea appealed to me. To stalk grandly along in front, keenly alert for fallen trees, treacherous places in the road, or even night prowlers of one kind or another, was a task for which I felt pre-eminently fitted. I knew Brooks thought so, for he called to me when I lagged behind, to keep a sharp eye on the road.

I thought once or twice that something had happened to him and Margaret in spite of my vigilance. I stopped at every fence that we had to cross, and waited for them to catch up. And once or twice they were so long coming that I felt sure they had got into trouble of some kind in spite of all my efforts. As it was, it took us a long time to get home.

When we finally did arrive, there was a light in the living room. I could not think what it meant, except that father had come to the conclusion that we had staid out too late, and was waiting up to talk to us about it. In that case, I did not want to go in alone, so when Margaret and Brooks stopped at the gate, I waited for them over near the door.

But they stood there so long that my curiosity finally got the better of me. I wanted to learn the meaning of that light. I went in. Mother got up from a chair by the table.

"Where is Margaret?" she asked.

"Out at the gate. Why?"

"O, nothing," and she sat back down.

When Margaret opened the door and saw her sitting there, she flung the door to with a bang, and just ran over and fell into her arms. She lay there for an instant perfectly still. Then she sobbed. Tears came into mother's eyes. I simply could not understand it. Folks seemed to cry when there was no earthly reason for it.

"Mother, what's the matter?" I asked.

"Run on to bed, Ben," she said.

I went reluctantly, leaving them there alone. Mother was stroking Margaret's reddish hair the last I saw of them.

The next morning I surprised father and mother in the kitchen.

"When did it happen?" he was asking, a broad smile on his face.

"Last night on the way home."

"But the girl is so young, Anne." And he sobered. "She is so very young."

"How old were you and I, Tommy?" mother asked him, softly.

"That's so!" father said.

Chapter 21

MARGARET'S wedding was set for the following June, partly because Hen would be at home then, but mainly because Margaret herself was determined that it should be in June. Hen could have come home any time, for the matter of that, and everything else could have been arranged. But when it came time for a final decision, she developed a stubbornness that amazed me, and said that the wedding had to be in June, and that was the end of it.

I could notice a big change in Brooks as the winter wore on. At first, when we were just beginning to get acquainted with him, he had been very frank and open. But he was just like most of the people that came to visit us—just cordial and nice and friendly. But after he had gone with Margaret for a while as a settled thing, he seemed to get more distant. There was a restraint, sometimes real embarrassment, in his attitude toward us. He talked to father, just as he had always done, and father warmed up to him more and more. But there seemed to be something about him that prevented a real understanding of him. And then, when he and Margaret got engaged, he changed again. But this time it was a change toward greater intimacy. Not a frank friendship, such as at first, nor a strained awkward relation, such as followed. This time there was something very intimate about him, that made him very easily understood and talked to. I even felt sorry at times that I had sold him all that bluing.

He came down to our house much oftener than he ever had. He sat around the fire and talked to us just as if he were one of the family. He and mother got to be great friends, and talked about many things together. And father, while he did not commit himself very often, nevertheless made it clear that he thought Brooks a very promising young man.

But the biggest change of all was in Margaret. When she got up of a morning, it was to sing like a mocking bird as she dressed. And in the kitchen, when mother gave her lessons about "running her own house," her laughter filled the house like the tinkle of sleigh bells on the mountain. There was something so irrepressible, so irresistible, so rompish, about her that she was never rebuked and forever indulged.

"I declare, Anne, I can't realise that she is our girl," father said to mother one day.

"How quickly they are gone!" and at that moment mother looked older than she had ever appeared before, and infinitely weary.

"I have always thought of her as just a baby," father continued.

"So have I."

"I wonder where they will live?"

"In Sistersville. Brooks is going in business with his father."

"Nice thing for Henry."

"Yes; he will live with them if he goes back. How far was that church Brother Charles spoke about, from Sistersville?"

"Not very far. And it was on the railroad, too."

Mother sighed.

"It is all for the best, I reckon."

It was so soon as the river went down in April that mother and Margaret went on a mysterious trip to Flatwoods. They might be gone two days, mother said. But to my inquiries as to the purpose of their going, she gave no satisfactory answer.

"We want to get some things," she said vaguely.

Even after they returned it was not very clear to me what they had done that kept them away for two days. But it was clear that from that time on our house was never the same. If I started to sit down on a chair, I was told to watch out that I did not sit down on "that pattern." If I made as if to toss my hat on the table, it was to "be careful that I didn't muss up something." If I opened the door it would be to shut it quickly lest something should blow away. Even to walk across the room was a hazardous undertaking, for I was in danger of stepping on something.

As a result of all this commotion, my disgust of the whole proceeding grew daily more intense. A wedding, in itself, was all right, I reflected liberally. And if Margaret wanted to have a fine one, she was entitled to it. But for it to be the one absorbing thing of the whole household, for it to upset all routine, and turn the house into a shamble, where meals were uncertain as to time and more uncertain as to preparation when they did appear, was to my mind carrying the thing a little too far.

When Hen came home he was so interested in it all that my admiration for him dropped to a very low point. I had always considered Hen a pretty safe pattern to go by, and had thought that if I did the things he did I should be pretty sure of myself. But the way he threw himself into the preparations for the wedding made me feel that in some very powerful way the outside world had changed Hen, and that not at all for the better.

He was to be best man. While I was not absolutely sure what that meant, I concluded that it must have reference to the rating of the people on the day of the wedding. I reflected that on an occasion of this kind, it would be only fair for the man who was to be married to be rated best man. Certainly he might be said to be the principal figure of the occasion; and for Hen to set himself up as best man and thereby force Brooks into a secondary place, seemed little short of an outrage. And once the thing was started, somebody else might take it into his head to be second best man, and force Brooks down even lower.

It turned out that Brooks had a sister named Grace, and it was decided that Grace should be bridesmaid. I had no difficulty here. I understood perfectly what that meant. In a story that had run in the Journal and Messenger for a whole year, there was constant reference to a maid who did all the hard work for the heroine. I thought it very proper in this case for Margaret to have a maid to do all her hard work on the day of the wedding, so that she could have plenty of time to enjoy herself.

Of course father was to perform the ceremony, and he said more than once in a triumphant way, that this wedding should be according to the Baptist ceremony, with no high church frills about it. I slipped up on him one morning out in the barn. Some one was evidently with him, for I heard voices as I approached. Then I peeped through the door. Father bowed low, stepped back slightly, and waving his hand toward an empty stall, said in his warmest voice,

"And now allow me to present my daughter, Mrs. Hollingshead, and her husband."

I understood. He was rehearsing the ceremony. For he closed every wedding in just that way. He always stepped back slightly from where he had been standing during the ceremony, bowed low, and waving his hand toward the bride and groom, introduced first the bride and then her husband.

But I was amazed that he practised things like this beforehand. I had supposed he always knew just what to do, and how things ought to be done. He fell in my estimation. He was not the original daring resourceful man I had thought him to be, after all.

I stood in the shadow of the door watching him for some little time.

His face spread into a silly smile. He advanced toward the empty stall.

"My dear boy, let me call you my son. You have taken my greatest treasure."

Then he looked resigned and greatly broken up, and very sorry. He looked as if he were almost ready to simper.

"Ah, yes. I know, son," he said as if in response to a reassuring speech. "Well, I give her to you, my boy."

This was too much. I stepped into the doorway.

"What you doing, father?" I asked.

He jumped, and whirled about, looking very much confused. His face reddened. Then he recovered himself and frowned coldly.

"What are you doing here, son?"

"Nothing."

"Then you go back to the house," he commanded severely.

I went back to the house, and into the living room.

"Why don't you go out and play, son. You are in the way here," mother complained fretfully.

I went out, started to the stable, bethought myself, and went to the garden to dig some bait. Putting some fish worms into an ancient tomato can, I went off to the creek.

The day before the wedding, Margaret and Brooks and Hen and I went up on the mountain to gather laurel. Margaret had decided that laurel should be used for the decorations. And in this I agreed heartily, for there were bushes so loaded down with it that they formed veritable thickets of bloom. Great round blossoms, with little shoots running out, pink at the base and shading into white at the tip! And the broad fat leaves were green and tender, and smooth as velvet. Each of us carried down a great load, and Margaret and Brooks, flushed with the mountain climb and the joy of life, turned our house from a staid old manse into a bower of Eden.

That evening Margaret stood watching the sky to see whether it might indicate the next day's weather. The sun sunk like a golden ball behind Honnels Gap, and little streamers of yellow light were flung back across the heavens for long afterward. She turned to father.

"Do you think it will rain to-morrow, father?" she asked nervously.

"'And he answered and said unto them, when it is evening ye say it will be fair weather, for the sky is red,'" he quoted.

"Then it simply CANNOT rain to-morrow?"

"Absolutely," for father believed in verbal inspiration.

Margaret skipped into the house, a great weight off her mind.

The great day arrived at last, and no one but had to admit that as far as nature was concerned, everything was perfect. Margaret had been plainly nervous about the weather, for Rude Hamilton said it was a fact, and she knew of many cases to substantiate it, that if a girl were married on a rainy day she would cry every day of her married life. And notwithstanding the sober testimony of Scripture to assure her of a fair day, Margaret was up at the peep of dawn, eagerly scanning the sky. I knew it, because she made such a clatter with her window that we all knew it.

The fog was heavy that early, and she was greatly concerned. But only for a little while. For soon the sun lifted above Buzzard Mountain, cleared the pines, and dispersed the fog like the sword of the Lord and of Gideon. His roseate rays revealed a perfect world. Dew sparkled on the grass and stood in little beads on the gate post. A great red bird from a wild cherry on the hillside called imperiously his morning song, and was answered by a modest note from the water birch. It was a glorious day.

The first guest to arrive was Rude Hamilton. She got there at ten o'clock, although the wedding was set for one. She came in her best black dress, her black hair drawn sharply back from her forehead. She had the appearance of being extremely hawk-eyed and capable as she marched in with jaws set. But poor Rude! It was many a day afterward that we learned that she had cried almost all night because she had to wear that slick black dress; and little did we know that her heart was almost bursting with anxiety lest she appear awkward and out of place among the wedding guests! It was only the shadow of death that drew these things from her. As it was, she marched into the room, jaws set and hawk eyes peering about. And I would not have been one whit surprised had she picked up the broom, driven us all from the house, and proceeded to give it a thorough cleaning.

But the house needed no such cleaning. It had got it. It had got such a going over that I wonder the very walls did not cry out in protest. All the back numbers of the Journal and Messenger had been used in papering; every thing movable had been out and beaten and sunned; even the stones in the fireplace had been scrubbed. There was no cellar in our house, and there was no garret, either. But had there been, it could have been said in all truth that from cellar to garret it was as clean as a pin.

At eleven o'clock Albert Hollingshead, his wife, and Grace arrived. Grace was beautiful. She was a little fairer than Brooks, but looked a lot like him. Her mother was a little white-headed old woman, as mild and gracious and sharp eyed as could be imagined.

Albert Hollingshead was a large man, very dignified and very impressive. He wore a white vest under his black coat, and it made him look very imposing and terrible. I was almost ashamed for father when I saw how big and important looking Mr. Hollingshead was, for I was afraid he would look insignificant beside him. But when father towered over beside him, his long Prince Albert falling to his knees, and looked him steadily in the eye while shaking hands, I just wanted to cheer right out. No one could get ahead of father!

Uncle Charles and his wife came next. He ran right up to Margaret and greeted her as Mrs. Hollingshead. Every one laughed, including Brooks and Margaret herself. And Aunt Amy did not have such a long red nose, after all. It was just a little long, but she was nothing like the ogre I had pictured her. Her eyes were very soft and kind, and I felt sure that she would understand things just like mother.

The people from Barren Rocks came in one by one, and after the first excitement of their coming wore off, the whole affair began to pall on me. It was all too stiff, too clean, to be comfortable. Mother had told me to put on my good clothes, but I had not done it, and in the general excitement she had not noticed my neglect.

So when things began to get too stiff; when there was nothing new to see, I slipped out the back door and went out to the stable. I had had enough of the wedding.

Idly I picked up a spade and shoved it into the soft earth. When I turned up the soil, great fat fish worms were sprawling about in it. I looked at them, at the sky, at the creek, and my day was decided. Hurriedly I hunted up an old can and put the worms in it. I got my pole from behind the house, and started.

As I was passing the end of the house, I looked through the open window into the little back room that we used as a storage room. It had been converted into an emergency pantry, and the sight that met my eyes set my mouth watering. Boxes had been turned into tables, and on them were big cakes of all kinds, all kinds of pies, and pudding and roast chicken. I stopped. I knew I would not be allowed to eat at the first table, even if I staid at home. But I knew also that if I were gone long I might miss everything. I had been to weddings before.

Temptation was strong on me. I thought I would just look a little closer. I put down the can and pole. The window was not very high, and I went over to it. Then I climbed in. I suddenly decided to make a very complete selection, getting a liberal portion of many things. But just then I thought I heard a suspicious movement in the kitchen outside. I knew if I were discovered I should be lost. A great custard pie was the first thing I could lay my hands on, and I laid them on it, none too gently. I vaulted the window sill and was gone.

It was hard work carrying the bait and pole and pie, and the pie suffered somewhat as to symmetry and general outline. But when I reached the security of the creek bank I put down the bait and pole, and turned my whole attention to the pie. In breaking up it made somewhat of a muss, but luckily it was on a plate. I ate it all, to the last crumb.

But the fish did not bite. Perhaps the sun was too bright. As the time wore on, I began to get restless. My mounting hunger had a lot to do with it, for the pie had not done its work with the thoroughness I could have wished. It had been good, mighty good, but it had lacked in some essential, for I was hungry in spite of it.

I decided to go home. If Rude Hamilton were around she would give me something to eat, for while she was forever grumbling, I had learned that I could wheedle almost anything out of her.

I didn't want to throw the bait away, for I might want to come back later. Neither did I want to leave it sitting in the sun, for it would dry. But I did not want to bother with the can. So I got some big paw-paw leaves, wrapped the worms carefully in them, and put them in my hip pocket. Then I started for home.

They were all in the living room when I arrived, and everything was still. Father's deep voice made the only sound. I was curious, and slipped around to the window where I could peep in. The people were standing about the walls, very rigid and tense. Father's back was toward me, and he stood facing Margaret and Brooks. Hen stood proudly up by Brooks, and Grace was by Margaret's side. Brooks looked very striking in his black suit, and Margaret—well, I hardly knew her. She was dressed in sheer white, and held in her hands a large bunch of white roses. Her reddish hair was piled high on her head. She looked very dainty, very beautiful, and as I looked I thought she swayed slightly toward Brooks.

I looked on until father stepped back slightly, bowed, and turned to the guests with his silly smile. And I waited to hear no more. I had heard it; knew exactly what he would say and how he would say it. I slipped into the kitchen.

Suddenly there was a great hubbub inside. All began speaking at once, or so it seemed to me from the general chattering. And then mother opened the door and stepped in.

"Ben!" she exclaimed in a horrified whisper. "You look a sight. Now you go in and put on your clothes and hurry out here."

She snapped out her words in a way foreign to her.

"But I can't go through there."

"Go out and climb through the window. Hurry, now."

I turned wretchedly away, and started out.

"Ben, what in the world is that falling out of your pocket. Ben, do come here!"

I went toward her in a daze. She looked both perplexed and terrified. I could not think what the matter was. She turned me around sharply, ran her hand into my hip pocket, and jerked it out again with a grasp.

"Ben, what *have* you got in there!"

I looked miserably down at the floor, and saw one of the big fat fish worms crawling aimlessly over the floor. It stretched out until it became very thin, waved its head vaguely, and then bunched up its body and crawled along. I stooped over and picked it up, the while clutching my pocket.

"It's just some fish worms."

"Well, you get them out of here! Goodness! What would they say if they found worms crawling about over the floor!"

I caught a fleeting glimpse of myself in the little glass as I hurried out. My pants were streaked with mud; there was mud on my feet and legs; and there were blotches of custard sticking to my shirt.

Quickly I crawled through the window and put on my best clothes, suit, shoes and all. By the time I was ready, all were in at dinner. They seemed in great good humour, but the longer they staid in there, the lower my spirits sank. It was only after everybody had finished that I finally got in.

When I came out, some had gone, and the others were getting ready. For many had a long way to go, and had to get home before dark.

It came time for Margaret to go. She had changed her white dress for a dark blue suit. Her face was a study in mingled happiness and regret. For Albert Hollingshead was to take Margaret and Brooks back with him, and she was to leave us. Brooks was jubilant. He laughed and talked, and promised to come back every week or two. He wrung father's hand and kissed mother good-bye.

Margaret went up to mother. She laid her hands on mother's shoulders. Mother's arm stole about her. They looked into each other's eyes for a long time.

"Good-bye, honey," mother said.

"Good-bye, Mammy," and her voice broke over the name, for it was what we had called her when we were all young together.

Mother stood in the doorway until she had got in the little spring wagon, waved her hand in farewell as they drove down the road, and then went out to the kitchen. She seemed utterly broken. She went into the little storage room and closed the door.

Chapter 22

MOTHER aged greatly during the next few weeks, in spite of the bubbling letters we got from Margaret. Margaret was wholly absorbed in the task of furnishing her new house, and from the accounts she gave us, it certainly gave promise of being a wonderful place. But even this did not serve to cheer mother up much. Of late she had a way of sitting by the open window and looking far off down the river. She sighed more often than in the old days. She looked older, too, much older than she had a few years back. She did not flush up so rosily any more, and her eyes had lost a lot of their old glow.

Father also fell into the habit of walking the floor and whistling his dolorous tune. Really, it got to be terrible about the house, and it was all because Margaret had gone. Those last few months she had been so perennially buoyant, that when she left it was like lifting a shaft of sunlight out of the house. Everything got darker.

I do not know what would have become of me if it had not been for the circus. There never had been a circus in Barren Rocks before, because we were too far from the railroad and the roads were bad. But along in the early part of August, an important looking man arrived in town.

I saw him when he first arrived at the store, and knew he was a stranger. For one thing, he wore store clothes on a week day, and that set him apart as a marked man.

And instead of having a bunch of walnut leaves stuck in the top of the horse's bridle to keep the horseflies off, little nets were on the horse's ears. That was another strange thing.

He drove up to the hitching pole, got out, hitched his horse, and went into the store.

"Are you the boss here, stranger?" he asked Jess Harver. Jess had taken Brooks's place in the store.

"I guess I be that," Jess said.

"I am advance agent for the Modern Railroad Shows. What do you say to my putting up some posters about here?"

A cunning look came into Jess's eyes.

"That had ought to be worth something, I reckon."

"Sure. I'll give you five tickets for the show."

"Will they admit any five I want to bring?"

"Sure."

"Give 'em to me."

The man pulled a bunch of tickets out of his pocket, snapped off a rubber band that held them together, and counted off five.

"Here they are. Now where will I post 'em up?"

Jess walked to the door. Across the road there was a little house where flour and corn where stored. It was long and low, and right by the side of the road. Jess pointed to it.

"Over there."

The man asked no more questions. He went out to his buggy, lifted out a bucket and a long handled brush and carried them over to the building. He made a trip back and got out a bundle of paper I had noticed earlier. Carrying it over to the building, he laid it down on the ground and unfolded it. What I saw almost took my breath away. There were pictures of men in tights, turning handsprings, walking on their hands, walking wires and ropes, swinging wildly in trapeze. And there were women, also dressed in tights, lying on their backs and kicking big balls into the air. There was one wonderful picture of a ventriloquist, throwing his voice into two little wooden babies he held on his knees.

With wonderful skill the man balanced these pictures on his brush and slapped them against the side of the building. When he had finished, the whole side of the building was one bewildering vision of colour and marvel. Feats I had never dreamed possible were actually pictured before me. And at the bottom, in white letters on a red background, were the words, "Modern Railroad Shows, Barren Rocks, August 10."

I ran home in a fever of excitement.

"Mother, there's going to be a show up in the schoolhouse bottom the tenth of August!"

"What kind of a show?"

"A regular show, actors all dressed up to walk wires and ropes and turn handsprings, and everything."

"How do you know?"

"A man has just been here and put up bill-posters about it."

Mother was delighted, and I asked her whether I could go to it.

"You will have to see your father about that," she said.

That was the one thing I did not want to do. I never could tell how a thing would strike father. When I had got my first pair of tan shoes without paying for them in full, I expected he would make an awful scene, but he seemed delighted, and said it was a great thing for me to do. But when I had a fine chance to trade my gun for one with a silver bead, one that looked better than mine, and would really shoot farther, he seemed greatly enraged, and said absolutely that I should not make the trade.

I did not know how to take him. He might be as excited over the show as I was, but again he might think it wrong to go to it, and not only refuse to buy me a ticket, but forbid my working for admission. But mother said I would have to ask him if I went, and ask him I did.

"We will see about it, son. There is time enough yet."

That was worse than nothing. If he had said flatly that I could not go, I would have been nearly killed, but at least I would have known what to expect. To say that he would see about it meant that he could put off telling me anything until the very day of the show, and then decide that I had better not go.

This made it terribly uncertain, but it did not prevent me from looking at the pictures on the building. I stood in front of them by the hour, and got to know them so well what when I went to bed at night I could shut my eyes and see them.

The tenth of August arrived at last, and bright and early I was up and around. I might not be able to see the show, but I could watch the wagons as the show arrived, and be up on the playground to see the tents go up! That might not be much, but it would be something well worth while.

I saw the first wagon as it came slowly up the river. Two great horses were pulling it. It was covered with a dirty canvas that had once been white. Behind it were three other wagons, all heavily loaded. And behind the four wagons were a number of people riding horses. One of them, a boy, was riding a small pony. He saw me as he galloped by, and straightened importantly in his saddle. Striking his pony sharply with a switch, he went by with a flourish, looking back at me arrogantly over his shoulder. I knew very well he was trying to show off, but my only thought was that if I could have a pony like that and belong to a show, nothing else in all the world would matter.

The big tent was hoisted up on the playground, and burly men with heavy sledges drove in the spikes that made it fast. Two would drive a spike at the same time, hitting alternately and grunting shortly at each stroke, and I watched them as though they were creatures from another world. They were heroes, mighty men, like Gideon and his three hundred. When one of them called to me to get busy and hand him a spike that was near me, I was flattered beyond words, and would have died for him then and there.

I went home in dread. I had not spoken to father in the morning, for fear he would not let me even go and watch the preparations. But I had to speak to him about the show proper, because the admission was fifteen cents, and if I got in he would have to give me the price of a ticket.

But I found him in great good humour. He was standing in the door as I came up, and he had on his white shirt, just like it was Sunday. He called out heartily.

"Hurry up, Ben, and get ready. We are all going to the show."

If he had said that he had inside information to the effect that I had not sinned away my day of grace, but on the contrary was absolutely certain to go to heaven when I died, a load of somewhat long standing would have been lifted from me. But my gratitude in that case would have been very mild compared to the wild joy that surged over me at his words. I felt light, and instead of coming down heavily on my feet when I walked, it seemed as if only my toes, and but the tips of them, touched the ground. I skipped into the house on air.

Mother came out of the bedroom with her mouth full of pins, and told me to wash my face good and comb my hair. Slight matters, these, when I knew I was to go to the show, and not only stand outside and watch the men at work, but go inside the big cool tent, with its tiers of seats and mysterious contrivances in the centre, and sit there through all the gorgeous performance!

On the way up to the playground I stopped at the poster to take one last glance at the pictures, anticipating each wonder as I saw it pictured. And then we went on up. A great crowd was gathered about. A man was selling lemonade under a big umbrella, and calling out hoarsely that the price of two glasses was but a nickel, five cents or half a dime, as the purcheser might desire. I felt as though I could drink not only two glasses, but all he had in the great jar at his side, but I knew that I had only two cents, and it was in a big two-cent piece, mouldy with age. I wouldn't have had it, but they refused to honour it at the store for more than one cent, explaining that the two-cent pieces were no longer made. And since I had got it in a bargain with Bill Hunter for a gold nugget stick-pin, I vowed that I would not part with it except at face value.

There were so many things to see, and being determined not to miss one slightest thing, I made good use of sight and smell and hearing. The cries of the venders, mingled with the loud imperious voice of the ticket seller for the main show, made noise enough even for me. The smell of roasted peanuts, the tent, straw spread on the ground as well as others that were new to me made a combination that provided me both with the joy of recognition and the baffling pleasures of smells unknown. And while it is properly a gastronomic state rather than an ocular, the only fitting description is that my eyes were gorged. Gorged with the sight of familiar faces of people standing about and staring as I did, and gorged with sights never before beheld!

Perhaps it would not be possible to say with absolute accuracy that a boy of more than medium height could, without any previous thought of the feat involved, bound suddenly into the air as high as his head would be if he were standing flat-footed. But if such a thing is possible, then I can say with a dead certainty that I did it, and without the slightest premeditation. I was standing watching with open mouth a clown up near the ticket seller, distorting his body out of all resemblance to the normal human form, when there occurred an explosion that seemed to me to surpass in violence anything I had ever heard. Even the explosion of a stick of dynamite in the big fishing hole were as nothing compared to it. And it was when this unexpected sound struck my ears that I performed my record high jump. Before I hit the ground, a second explosion followed; and all eyes were turned in the direction of the sound.

"What is it, father?" I cried, simply terrified.

"Come on, son. It's the band!" and we edged forward.

I learned that the explosion had been caused by the beating of a big drum, a form of musical instrument I had never seen before, and of whose musical properties I have ever since been suspicious. But the band as a whole was a wonderful affair. My interest centred especially in a large fat man who was busily engaged in blowing into the mouthpiece of a great horn. His cheeks puffed out perilously, and as they puffed out his eyes receded into his head until they were scarcely visible. I stood rooted to the spot, expecting him to burst at any minute, and resolved that when he did I should be on hand to see the sight. I was greatly disappointed when the band ceased and he still remained whole, although puffing rapidly.

The women who played in the band were unlike the women in Barren Rocks. Their dresses were short, the heels of their shoes were slender and very high, and their waists were very, very slim. Their faces, where not unusually white, were very pink. They fitted nicely my conception of what the wonderful women from out in the world should look like. But Rude Hamilton did not share my opinion. She elbowed over to mother.

"It's scandalous, Sister. Just look at the hussies with their painted faces!"

"Hush, Sister," and mother shrank away from her.

I heard a man calling at the top of his voice.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, before the big show opens inside, Charles O'Down, the great tight wire walker of the world, will give us his wonderful open-air exhibition. Make way," and his voice indicated plainly that in our midst was one of the wonders of the world. We made way.

There was a wire stretched from a stake out on the playground up to the centre pole at the top of the big tent. When the crier finished speaking, a wonderful figure in tights, with a beautiful purple girdle about his waist, ran nimbly out of the big tent and to the base of the wire. He carried a long polished pole in his hands, and when he reached the stake, he bowed to us and smiled. He grasped the pole firmly in both hands and started up the wire. He walked clear to the top of the tent, turned, and came back down. Now he stopped, bent his knees until both touched the wire, and straightened up again. Or he stood on one foot and stuck the other far out in the air. I thought it simply wonderful. When he had finished, he re-entered the big tent, and there was a rush for admission after him.

The show was all that could be desired. I sat on a bench and watched until my eyes ached. Wonderful men performed on trapeze; stout women laid on their backs and kicked highly coloured balls into the air; and the ventriloquist, after much worry and patience, finally succeeded in getting his little wooden babies to spell Constantinople. During an exciting performance on the trapeze, the actor stopped suddenly, clutched his side and fell to the ground. There was an excited gasp from the onlookers. I thought the man had fallen and hurt himself badly, and many started toward him. But the mild voice of old Henry Tolliver recalled them.

"Don't be excited. He's done it every day yit," he said with great relish.

"Have you seen it before?" some one asked.

"I've been a follerin' 'er now fer four days," he said complacently.

When the show was over we all jostled outside. The men who were selling peanuts and lemonade took up again their hoarse cry. I edged over toward the lemonade stand. The price was down. Three glasses for a nickel, five cents or half a dime, still as the purchaser might desire. I edged closer, clutching my big two-cent piece.

"How much will you give me for this?" I asked the man, holding it out toward him.

"Two glasses," he answered promptly.

"Pour it out."

He filled a large glass, and I began to drink it down. There was no ice in it by this time, and it was warm, but it was good. I held back the empty glass to have it refilled. He poured it full. I looked around. Ed Rainey was standing near me, his eyes bulging. I put the glass to my lips and drained the last drop.

"Great stuff, Ed," I said, wiping my mouth.

Chapter 23

THE day after the show, all of us boys were up at the swimming hole. Charlie Snowden got up on the rock to dive into the water. Just as he was nicely balanced, with his hands stretched high above his head, Hen stopped him. Again Hen showed his originality.

"Try to turn a handspring like the man yesterday, Charlie. It won't hurt in the water if you don't go over."

Charlie took to the idea. He readjusted himself, waved his arms to get the proper motion, and leaped awkwardly into the air. He lit in the water on his back, and we all laughed at him. But every one tried the same thing.

That was the beginning of our own show.

At first, our efforts were somewhat vague. Each felt at liberty to try anything that appealed to him, and failing in one thing, tried another. But each early began to manifest special adaptabilities. Charlie Snowden could turn handsprings better than anybody else; Hen developed an ability at clog dancing that beat anything I ever saw; Bill Hunter could walk a rope, a little uncertainly, it is true, but nevertheless with considerable dexterity; while I walked on my hands with ridiculous ease, from the start. Ed Rainey made a fine general actor. Grouchie could not do anything well, for he was frightfully awkward. So we decided to make him a clown. He did look funny as a clown, sprawling awkwardly about. And he never wanted to be left out of anything.

We practised for a few days up at the swimming hole, for even when we did fall, it didn't hurt in the water. But when we became more confident, we moved on down the creek to a level place near a great fallen sycamore. We chose this place because the limbs of the sycamore afforded a good place for skinning cats and doing other things like that. And also the sycamore made a rather comfortable place for spectators to sit. For Hen afterwards told me that he had planned the whole thing along big lines, all along, though he would not shoulder the responsibility for everything that happened.

It was great fun. We stretched a big rope from one tree to another; put up a trapeze and a horizontal bar; and erected a little platform for Hen's clog dancing. And here we practised every spare hour we could get.

There was but one thing lacking to make everything perfect—a band. Of course we could not get a real band, but Hen found a way around the difficulty by persuading Herb Ellanger to play his banjo for us.

And after we had practised everything until there was nothing more to learn; and after Herb had worked over his banjo until he could rattle off tunes fast enough for Hen's fastest dance, we announced our first public performance for the following Saturday afternoon.

We planned an elaborate programme. I was to walk on my hands; Hen was to dance on the platform where his feet would crack; Bill Hunter was scheduled to walk the big cable; and Charlie was to turn his handsprings, and also hold by his toes on the trapeze. In some unusual way he was able to hold himself up with his toes, and so amazing was his success that we featured him in this act. Grouchie was to be clown, and we were to paint his face with poke berries, and dress him up in Henrietta's old dress.

We were all on hand after an early dinner. And about three the spectators began to arrive and line themselves up on the big sycamore. The performers were hid from the public gaze, out behind a clump of elders, and as time should come for each one's act, he was to run nimbly out in close imitation of the great Charles O'Down.

Herb Ellanger tuned up his banjo, broke raucously into the "Sourwood Mountains" and the show was on! Charlie Snowden came first on the programme, and as he ran nimbly out, was greeted with wild applause. Jumping up and down a few times as if testing the solidity of the earth beneath him and finding it as desired, he swung agilely backwards, describing a wide arch, and turned completely over and lit on his feet. The spectators agreed as one man that it was good, and instantly demanded more. He turned more handsprings backward, and turned handsprings forward. He was red in the face and apoplectic, but he was clearly drunk with applause. He performed on and on. Hen finally stepped from behind the elders and waved frantically for him to go on to his act on the trapeze. Charlie saw and understood. He walked to the trapeze like a conquering hero. He swung nimbly up, fell over forward, and caught by his toes. He hooked his long bony toes over the trapeze bar, straightened out his knees, and bent his body up to look at himself. The crowd was delighted. Then he dropped down and trotted nimbly back to the elders.

In order not to have all the good acting coming at once, we had arranged for some funny acts in between. One of these was by Grouchie and me. He was to be a dentist, and for this purpose had borrowed a giant pair of tongs of the blacksmith. I was to go to him to have a tooth pulled, and had provided myself with an uneven wooden tooth. And to make the scene more realistic, I was to fill my mouth with red apple jelly. We figured that, if I filled my mouth with it, I could make an awful scene when my tooth was pulled, by letting the red apple juice run out of my mouth.

Just before the act I filled my mouth with it and the wooden tooth. It was hard work to keep all the juice in without swallowing it, and when I wanted to say something I had to turn back my head and gurgle. But I managed it someway.

When the time came, Grouchie went out and sat down by a wooden block. I soon followed him, walking unsteadily, as if in great pain. I sat down and laid my head on the block. Grouchie wasn't very careful with the tongs, and they grated terribly over my real teeth. But he managed to get them fastened firmly on the great wooden tooth, and yanked it out. I groaned horribly, and turned over on my side so every one could see my face.

Grouchie stood over me, tongs in his hand, watching intently. But as the apple juice ran out of my mouth, he bent over quickly.

"Get up, Ben," he whispered. "It's not running out red, at all."

I got up hastily, and we ran out behind the elders.

Hen's clog dance came last. By nature he was fitted for the part. His legs were long, and when they were weighted down by his long shoes, the way he could wave them around was a show in itself. He could relax his body until every part of it seemed to join in the dancing.

He stepped out on the platform, bowed, and stood for a moment, as if getting ready. Herb started in on "Sourwood Mountains" at a pace that fairly reeled. Then Hen really woke up.

His whole body relaxed, his long legs began to shuffle to the music, and the big shoes came down on the boards in a veritable uproar. He waved his arms wildly over his head, his body swayed from side to side in wild abandon, he reeled to and fro like a drunken man, but ever his feet came down in rhythmic time with the banjo.

I had never seen him acquit himself with such marvellous skill. I stood watching him in fascination. At first the spectators from the sycamore looked on unmoved; then they began to take a more personal interest; and at last they swung down from the seat, hugged each other, and began to dance. Over and above it all, the rhythmic and contagious clatter of Hen's big shoes could be heard; and Hen himself, looking on the wild demonstration as a tribute to his own art, redoubled his efforts.

The whole show broke up amidst the wildest confusion. Some shouted their exuberance to the heavens; others hugged each other in maudlin joy. While some went so far as to declare soberly that we should go on the road with the show.

We took up a collection just at the proper moment, and got enough to buy a uniform for each actor. We got the material, and had the uniforms made during the ensuing week, and were on hand for a second performance the following Saturday afternoon.

For a few weeks the crowd was good, and the collections encouraging. Some faithful ones came every Saturday, and spread the news so widely that new spectators lined the sycamore at each performance. But it was not long until attendance dwindled, and the sycamore was almost bare. We did all we could to keep up interest, but we worked at heavy odds.

One of Harrison Applebee's old cows had seen fit to wander out behind the sycamore and die. A protest was made to Harrison that he ought to drag the animal away and bury her. And he declared that he would do just that, if she were on anybody's private land. But the spot happened to be on an unclaimed tract that skirted the sandy bars of the creek, and he therefore considered himself absolved from any responsibility in the matter. The members of the show met and discussed the proposition, and decided as one man that it would represent a policy of enlightened self-interest to bury the cow. But while each one favoured the general idea strongly, none seemed willing to take the initiative in any definite steps.

And as the weather continued to be very warm, it was perfectly evident that some one had neglected his duty. The sycamore tree could not truthfully be called a pleasant place to spend a warm afternoon.

There were other complications. And it was Hen's dance that made them. Perhaps, if taken by itself, there could have been nothing about it to which exception would be taken. He was a trifle wild, of course, but not more so than his liberties as an actor would justify.

But it was the effect his act never failed to produce upon the spectators. It seemed to carry them clear off their feet, and be the general signal for a free-for-all, old-fashioned dance. It might have made some difference if Hen had not been the minister's son. But as it was, it got to be whispered around that the show was getting to be the meeting place for the wicked and unregenerate element of the country, and Hen's name was mentioned among the ringleaders.

The result was that father took him aside one day and had a very long and very pointed conversation with him. I watched them, and saw Hen shaking his head, as if in strong disavowal. But from that day the show lost two of its performers, and soon dwindled away.

Chapter 24

THE crickets and katydids had been silenced by Jack Frost before our school began, but on the opening day I gathered up the books that Hen had used, and Margaret after him, and went to school alone.

The teacher assigned the seats on the first day, and when he gave me mine, I was struck by the fact that it was the one Hen had called his own during my first year in school. The thought was not altogether pleasant. It turned my mind back over the years to the day I had first entered the house as a scholar. How different many things now were, and how alike were others! There were the same pine benches, hewn from the straight trees that grew so near the playground. Smooth on top where they had been carefully gone over with the broad-axe, they were rough underneath where the knots had been smoothed off. The blackboard was the same. Three men had been hired to make it years before. They had gone to a slate quarry down the river, picked out a great ledge of slate, and sawed a piece from it. It was this piece that made our blackboard, and it was rough where the saw had cut into it. Even the same eraser was used that had been procured during my first year in school. It was a rough piece of sheep skin that an old scholar had got at home.

But while these things were the same, as well as the great stove in the centre of the room, red with rust and cracked down the lower front, hardly anything else was the same. There was a new teacher, a young man that the trustees had brought in to teach our school. This was his first year, and he went at his work in a different way from that to which we had been accustomed. Hen was gone. He had been away to school for four years and was now on his fifth. He was likely to be a teacher himself next year. Margaret was gone and the seat she had occupied in the years gone by was empty now. It was back near the water bucket, and when I saw it was empty, I thought of Margaret with a wave of homesickness.

Ed Rainey, Bill Hunter and Charlie Snowden had dropped out the year before. They had said they were too big to go to school any more, and had staid at home to help with the work.

As it was, I was now one of the "older pupils." How I had envied the older ones on my first year! And how I had coveted their privileges, and been jealous of their intimacy with the teacher! But now I found myself almost alone, one of the oldest boys in school, without a seat mate or any one to play with at noon except the smaller scholars. As I thought, I grew more lonely, and simply could not put my mind to my studies.

It was also lonely at home when winter set in. During the summer when I could get out whenever I wanted to, I had not missed Margaret at all. But she had had a habit of reading to us out of the books Brooks would bring her, and I found myself missing her and her reading on many a long winter evening.

But I was not entirely alone. There was Little Anne. At first my feeling toward her had been of dislike. She was so little and ugly that I could not bring myself to think kindly of her. But as she grew older, this feeling changed to one of mild curiosity. The way she waddled about when she tried to walk was really funny.

And I could also see that she did look cute when she had just one tooth in all her mouth. It was very white and round, and when she smiled it looked very nice. She had a way of doubling up her fists and striking out wildly, that amused me. Altogether she was a curiosity that I welcomed as one of the very interesting things in life.

But as she got older she developed into a veritable nuisance. She was always on the point of falling into the fire, or swallowing a knitting-needle, or rolling off the bed, or any one of a thousand very dangerous and unreasonable things. Now, mother couldn't watch her all the time. She had to make the beds and get dinner, and do any one of a number of things. And since father was away quite a bit, especially in the winter when he had so many meetings to hold, it fell to my lot to take care of Little Anne. I complained to mother on one occasion that the child was positively devilish, and contrived all these heathen practices solely to aggravate and worry us. Mother was shocked, and explained with some heat that the baby did not know any better, and that I had been as bad if not worse when I was little. But without some positive evidence to this effect, I was inclined strongly to disbelieve her.

Little Anne had a way of getting into the kitchen and fingering the dead ashes in the cook stove. Nor was she content merely with feeling them. She had an insane desire to try to eat everything she got her hands on, and the ashes were no exception. Now dead wood ashes, properly distributed over a moist skin, will produce an effect that for genuine dirt leaves little to be desired. And when Little Anne would get to the stove in spite of my vigilance and smear herself over thoroughly, she was simply awful.

And there was another thing. When mother had a large tablecloth on the table, the corners of it would hang down pretty low. While she seemed to have no definite object in view, Little Anne would invariably make for the corner of this tablecloth, seize it firmly and pull and saw on it for all the world like a young pup a-hold of a horse blanket. And if I did not reach her in time there was danger of her pulling both the cloth and the dishes on it off on the floor.

She seemed to understand that I had been set over her as a protector, and from complete incorrigibility at first, she developed a kind of stubborn affection for me. She began to follow me around. This made matters very awkward. When I used to start off with Hen and he did not want me to go, he would say that I had to go back to the house, and I went. But Little Anne was not old enough to understand properly what was said to her, and try as I might, I was unable to make her see that I did not want her toddling around after me. If she could have kept it up independently I would not have minded so much. But that was the trouble. She would start out briskly, follow me for quite a distance in spite of my protests, and then invariably she would fall down. And when she fell down and began to scream, there was but one thing for me to do. I either had to carry her back to the house and stay there with her, or carry her with me wherever I went.

The boys got to noticing it. They did not say much, for some of them had had to do the same thing. But I knew matters could not go on like this indefinitely without something being said. And I was right. They took to calling me Mother Ben, and it was not until I had whaled the life out of a few of them that the affair was hushed up.

Little Anne was the greatest cross I ever had to bear. It was only after the supper dishes were washed, and mother had come into the living room for the evening, that I could get any lasting relief. By that time it was usually too late to go anywhere for the evening. Even had it not been, I was so harried by the intolerable protectorship of the day that I felt more inclined to go wearily to bed than to do anything else.

Our school was not graded. The only progressive studies were the readers. There were six of them. The pupil started in the first and went on to the sixth. And when he had read McGuffy's Eclectic Sixth Reader, he was through with school. Grammer, of course, changed some. There was a primary and an advanced text, but the time of leaving one for the other was indefinite. As a rule though, the student kept on with the primary until he could recite the lessons without any effort whatever, and then he was put in the advanced class, where he remained until he left school. The same was true of arithmetic, geography, history and physiology. There were two books in each subject, the primary and the advanced, and on leaving the primary one kept on with the advanced until through with school altogether. And besides these studies there were no others.

I had not taken to school as Hen had. It seemed the very breath of his life. He would sit up at home until long into the night working hard on his arithmetic. And he knew his history and grammar and physiology almost by heart. But the books did not seem to interest me greatly. Physiology was fair, and I thought it great fun to trace all the muscles and blood vessels of the body. I could name all the bones in the body as glibly as I could say my own name, but I was greatly exercised over an apparent division of opinion as to the number of bones in the body. My book said there were two hundred and six, and I knew the name of every one of them. But the teacher had explained that this point was not finally settled; that there might, in short, be two hundred and eight bones in the body. I could not for the life of me see how any one could make a miscount in such an important matter; and wondered why the authorities did not get a skeleton and go over the bones together. But the teacher threw as much doubt over the whole question as he could.

There was another thing about the physiology that got me into difficulties. At the end of each chapter, whether that chapter dealt with the muscles or the teeth or the nervous system or what not, there was a long paragraph or two setting forth the injurious effects of tobacco upon that particular part of the body. The case was made pretty strong—the heart, arteries, veins and capillaries being particularly susceptible. And a tobacco chewer was liable to about every kind of horrible disease we had ever heard of, from toothache and cancer of the mouth to quick consumption.

I had smoked a little before, but had not chewed. Chewing never appealed to me as a very enjoyable thing, and it was apt to be a little bit dirty, especially for a man with a beard. But the physiology would not let a day go by without opening up the whole question of tobacco in every form. And at last my curiosity was aroused. What did the stuff taste like, anyway? It must surely be strong, to cause such terrible results.

I knew where to find some at home. Back in the little storage room there were eight or ten long twists of the natural leaf. Harrison Applebee grew tobacco on his farm, and he had given father some of it. The leaves had been stemmed carefully, and the twists made. They were big at one end, and tapered down to a point at the other. I slipped one of them out and went up on the hill to experiment. I held the twist in my hand at first, feeling it over curiously. Then I smelled of it. It was dry and as I whiffed it some of the little powdered pieces snuffed up my nose. I coughed violently.

The first sensation when I took a chew of it in my mouth was that it was hot. It seemed to burn my lips. I rolled it around with my tongue. I hoped the first time I should spit that it would be a rich, dark brown. But it was not so. And by the time I had succeeded in producing the proper shade of colour, my interest in the whole affair had waned noticeably. I felt a churning sensation in my stomach, and a light giddy dancing just above my eyes. I groaned, but that did not help matters. The world became dark and sombre; and objects that a few minutes ago were bright, had changed to a dull yellow. I locked my fingers and put my hands against my stomach, in the hope that I could still the tempest that evidently was raging there. I doubled up, bringing my knees and chest just as close together as possible. My head swam. I thought I should die immediately, and it did not help any when a thought of my future state flashed through my mind, to reflect that it was wrong to chew tobacco. My stomach did not cease its gyrations, but rather became more insistent. It seemed to be beating against its confining boundaries, struggling to liberate itself into a more comprehensive field. One of its lunges for liberty was straight in the direction of my mouth. The fury of the thing bent me over double, but I had the presence of mind to open my mouth and set the prisoner free.

When I at last stood up, the whole question of poise that I had mastered when learning to walk, and since relegated to the purely habitual forms of action, had to be taken up again. I was unsteady on my legs; and familiar objects had a way of side-stepping nimbly when I went to place a hand against them. When I would put my foot firmly down to advance, it would not necessarily go where I had intended it. Just as likely as not it would shoot far out to one side, throwing me completely off my balance. Objects that in my saner moments had always been fixed, reeled around with such fantastic abandon that I was completely bewildered.

But at last the external world began to take on a more stable form, and the world inside fell back into the old rut. I was myself again. Carefully I made my way to the back room, and slipped the remainder of the twist back with the others. When I laid it down, a heavy odour of strong tobacco smote my nostrils. I felt again the terrible symptoms. Straightening up quickly, I fled out of the room.

And the next day, when I read in the physiology that tobacco has a tendency to stiffen the arteries, I knew that tobacco has a tendency to do many other things not mentioned in the book.

The school year was drawing to a close when we got a very interesting letter from Hen. He had finished the Seminary the year before, and had gone back for another year to take a normal course, since he could live with Margaret and it would not cost much. He was intending to teach a year or two, and then go on to college. He was to be a Doctor, father said. The letter we got was jubilant. He had just heard from the trustees that he had been given the High Hill school for the following year.

The High Hill school was not far from our house, and Hen could teach it and board at home. It was the school Jane Ellanger had attended when she went to school.

Jane was at our house when the letter came. She had taken to coming down to our house almost every day that winter. She said it got so lonesome up at home that she just had to get out somewhere. Mother liked to have her down, for while she never said much, I could see she had never got used to Margaret's being away. And Jane helped some.

Jane's cheeks were naturally red, but they got redder when father read the letter from Hen. I thought her fingers trembled a little as she stitched away on something she was making.

And mother's spirits went up from that hour. Her face even flushed up as it had in the old days, and her eyes had a little of the old glow in them. And she and Jane were together even more than ever after that.

The day before our school closed, I gathered all my books together to carry them home. We never left them until the last day, for there was such confusion then that it was never safe to leave anything around loose. I got my reader, grammar, geography, history, physiology and arithmetic. Then there were my slate and tablet. The slate and geography were very broad, and were hard to carry. But I got all my things together, and started home.

I had been looking forward a little to finishing school for good, for it was hard to stay inside and study when everything outside was so interesting and beautiful. But as I walked out of the door, it struck me with new force that I had spent my last year in the old schoolhouse. I should never again return as a scholar.

I walked down the playground, past the little mound where the pitcher stood, on to the high bank down which we slid at the last recess, down to the narrow foot log over Little Creek across which we had had to coon on icy mornings. And it was not such a gladsome farewell as I had expected.

A few days later, Hen came home, looking tall and handsome. I was very proud of him as he stood in the living room, with his hair neatly cut, and brushed closely down against his head. He looked very smart and intelligent. And Jane quit coming down.

One day not long after he came home, Hen went up for Jane and took her out for a boat ride. They were to go far up the river, with him rowing while she trolled. It was a beautiful afternoon when they set out; and I stood on the bank and watched them until they disappeared round the bend.

It was only a few hours afterward that the sky became overcast and lowering, and not long after that there came up one of the swift, terrible storms that swooped down upon us at times. In great rolling sheets the rain swept down the bottom, and soon the little rivulets came roaring down the mountainsides, and emptied their muddy contents into the river.

In the midst of the downpour Hen and Jane came home. They were both dripping wet, but hilariously happy. Their muffled laughter reached us long before they were at the landing. Hen took Jane straight home, and came back himself in a little while. His lips were blue and a little drawn, but his spirits were high.

"Did you get very wet, son?" mother asked anxiously.

"Do I look it?" and he brushed the water from the end of his nose.

"I hope Jane didn't get chilled."

"Not so that I could notice it."

He seemed greatly elated, and mother glanced over at father significantly. He grinned back at her. Hen went into the bedroom and changed his clothes. When he came back out he still seemed tremendously elated, as if at the possession of some secret information.

But when he came back from Ellangers' the next afternoon, he looked greatly disturbed.

"Jane's not feeling so well," he said to mother.

"Is she sick from getting wet?"

He nodded, and went quickly out.

It was a week afterward that Herb came to our door.

"Wish you would come up and see Jane, Mrs. Rhodes," he said.

It was late afternoon, but mother hurried away. Father got supper that night, and after supper he went up, also. I was in bed when he came back, and it was not until the next day that I learned what the trouble was.

Pneumonia. Poor Jane! For weeks she lay at the point of death, sometimes raving in delirium, sometimes so still that her breathing was hardly perceptible. It was in her delirium that she called loudly and persistently for Hen. At such times he would go in and sit down by the bedside, but she never seemed to recognise him.

When at last she was able to be up, she was but the shadow of her former self. And as the lazy summer wore on, she did not seem to get much stronger. She was very poor. Her hands were very white, and so thin that one could almost see through them. Her face was pale, except for the bright red spot on either cheek bone. Her eyes were bright, unnaturally bright, and the look in them came to be terrible. She coughed frequently.

We went up to have dinner with the Ellangers one Sunday, and the thing most noticeable about Jane was her eyes. They seemed unusually large and prominent, and the look of them haunted me for days afterward. One day not so long before, we had been up on the hill cutting wood. Old Ponto was sniffing importantly around, and as father was felling a big beech tree, he noticed Ponto right in the path of it. He called frantically to him; and Ponto made a desperate effort to get clear. But he was too late. One of the crooked limbs caught him across the back. He was not killed, but he dragged himself painfully out when father pried up the limb. Very sadly, father sent me home after the rifle. My heart was just pounding in my throat when I came back with it and handed it to him. Then I stuck my fingers in my ears and ran aimlessly up the hill. But not before I took a last look at Ponto. He seemed to understand, for he stood there, licking his lips and looking patiently at father. And the look that was in his eyes was the look that was in Jane's eyes.

In some desperate way, she seemed to be trying to avoid something. But there was about her that which suggested that she understood that in spite of all her struggles the case was hopeless.

Of course she never came to our house any more. She was too weak to walk that far. But mother often went over to spend the day with her, and on many such occasions I accompanied her.

In a low voice Jane often talked about the good times she had had. And at such times the bright spots on her cheeks were brighter still. Now and then she would refer to the good times she expected to have when she got over her "cold," and always at such times she looked eagerly at mother as if for confirmation.

And it was on just such a lazy lovely day as late August often brought to Barren Rocks, that the word which we had been dreading finally came. Herb came down, and in a few broken sentences explained all.

Very slowly, very deliberately, father went into the little back room for his hatchet and saw. Very slowly and very deliberately he crossed the river and went up the hill. And I knew what it meant. He was going to make Jane's coffin. Some broad, heavy oak planks, carefully measured and carefully sawed; some black cloth tacked carefully over it; a few screws fitted in place—

that was all. For father was always both undertaker and minister.

And it was on another one of those lazy, beautiful days that mother and I set out for the little cluster of pine trees that grew down below the Ellanger homestead. When we got there, many people were standing about, for the funeral should be conducted there. Old Herb Ellanger came down before we had been there long, and leaning heavily on him for support, was Sarah, his wife. He still appeared awkward and clumsy, his head drawn to one side, but there was that in his attitude toward Sarah that was infinitely considerate and kind. And as father talked in a low voice, standing at the side of the rough casket, Sarah Ellanger stood like Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they were not.

And then a slight trip to the back of the farm, where were other graves than the one newly dug; a few words committing ashes to ashes and dust to dust; a final prayer—and it was over. Jane Ellanger was no more.

It was many a day after the funeral of Jane before we settled back into our accustomed ways of life. For long a shadow seemed to have fallen which could not be lifted. Mother spent days at a time with Sarah Ellanger, trying to give her what comfort she could. Hen never said so much as a single word, but he seemed for a long time strangely silent and preoccupied. It was as if his mind were struggling to adjust itself to new conditions which he could hardly realise.

But it was not long until he began his new school, and his mind was occupied by the unaccustomed duties. He enjoyed it very much, and it was not long before one after another expressed himself to father, that Hen was a great success as a teacher.

Along toward spring, father and Hen got to taking long walks together, as they had done years before. They were discussing Hen's future, I felt sure, for father had his heart set on Hen's being a doctor. But there was one thing I did not realise, and that was that now I figured largely in their planning.

For some reason it had never occurred to me to think that I should grow up and follow the same course that Hen had taken. Barren Rocks seemed completely sufficient for me, and it never entered my mind to plan for anything which would take me away. But father's plans had run far ahead of mine, and his hopes for us all were more than we realised.

But if a lightning flash had stunned me I could not have been more dumfounded than I was with the information father finally imparted to me.

"How would you like to go to Sistersville to school, Ben?" was the way he began.

For a time I was unable to answer. I was wholly unprepared to cope with the idea.

"I don't know," I finally answered.

"We have decided to send you there this fall," he said.

I was nonplussed. And for many days I could not fully comprehend the meaning of his words. I go away from Barren Rocks: Go off to the Seminary; leave home, and go among strangers? But finally, when by Hen's graphic descriptions I was enabled to realise more fully what it all meant, I was wholly delighted. To leave Barren Rocks and go out into the world; to get an education—and I had been taught that a good education stood next in importance to saving my own soul; to live in a town where there were street lamps, and sidewalks, and stores where bananas were kept all winter; to go where men wore white collars every day—to do all this, I finally believed, I was privileged beyond my wildest dreams.

Hen spoke of debating societies. He told me of a great debate over at Sistersville, in which he had participated. Calhoun Seminary had debated Wade Seminary; there was a great audience; judges waiting to render decision as to the winning side! My imagination kindled. I resolved fiercely that I should be a great debater; and perhaps, when I grew up, a criminal lawyer. I was not just clear as to the duties of a criminal lawyer, but the name sounded so important that I determined to be one.

And he told of awards for scholarship; how the best scholar in the school was always given a medal at commencement; and I resolved to win the medal or die.

Late in the summer father and I went to Flatwoods. He wanted to get me a respectable outfit, he said. And he certainly did. He got me a new suit and an extra pair of pants; a new hat and a cap and three store shirts, and some stockings and a pair of fine shoes. I had never had so many clothes in my life, and the knowledge that they were really mine was very comforting.

And mother worked to get all my things ready just as she had worked for Hen. She saw to it that all my clothes were mended, and washed and ironed. Every little thing was gone over carefully. And she packed a suit case for me back in the little storage room, only it was not the suit case that Hen had used. He had worn his out with many trips, and father had got a new one for me.

The morning on which I was to start found us up bright and early. Mother had prepared one of her famous breakfasts: Big hot biscuits baked with buttermilk, cane molasses, eggs and bacon. She hovered around my chair, helping me to everything. And she urged me to eat another egg when I was already full to bursting.

Hen went out to saddle the horses. He came back riding Old Bill and leading Bird. Father tied my suit case firmly to the saddle horn and took my hand. He gripped it hard, and his eyes were very kind and sad.

"Write to us often, son," he said.

Little Anne climbed timidly down the steps and held out her little hand.

"Good-bye, Bennie," she said.

And I was stricken with remorse for all my angry thoughts concerning her.

We rode slowly down the road. The road was damp and dark with the dew, and as the horses' feet struck it the dust flew up in little ragged balls. We got to the bend, and I looked back over my shoulder. Father was standing at the gate. He faced the east, and the morning light fell strongly upon him. He was absolutely motionless; and his face looked thoughtful, meditative, sad.

I looked about for mother. She was not to be seen. And suddenly I remembered where she had stood on that day years ago when Hen had first left home: In my mind I pictured her standing by the window, holding back the curtain with her hand, looking toward me.

I jerked my head about, and rode on. In spite of myself my mind ran back to that first day, when I had left to take Hen to the station. I recalled the pang of jealousy that had shot through me, at the attention he was receiving. I remembered also that I had wished to be in his place, and have all the concern for myself. But now that our positions were reversed, I found it almost intolerable. Gladly would I have given up all hope of an education, all the excitement of Sistersville and the unknown pleasures that I had anticipated, if only I could have turned Bird around and ridden back home to stay there forever.

When we came near the Evans home, I thought I saw some one standing out by the road. When we approached nearer, there was no mistaking it. It was Essie. Her hair was done up on her head now, and her blue dress came well below her knees. I thought she looked very tall and straight and dainty as I stopped beside her.

"I have come out to say good-bye, Ben," she said.

"I'll be back soon," I said, almost roughly.

She held out a little square package.

"Open this when you eat your lunch, Ben," and she gave it to me.

"Is it something good—dear?" I asked boldly.

Again she smiled, as she had one other day, long before. But this time there was no hint of anger.

"Yes—honey. I made it for you."

I shook the bridle reins and started off at a trot.

"Don't forget to come back, Ben," she called after me.

"Don't you fear," I answered back.

Hen was intending to make the round trip that day. It would take him far into the night, but he said he would rather ride until late than stay somewhere over night.

When we stopped for lunch on a grassy knoll topping a great mountain, I opened the package Essie had given me. It was a little box filled with fudge. It was a little hard, and inclined to be brittle, but it was very good.

At last we reached the depot. It was a little red building, and stood well on the outskirts of Monroe. It looked very lonely and deserted. But I looked with wonder on the small man in the ticket office, thinking that his grasp of the big outside world must be very complete indeed.

Hen untied my suit case and set it down on the little cinder platform. He went into the depot with me to get my ticket, and then, as the train was not due for an hour, and he wanted to make home that night, he said he would start back at once.

He untied the horses, let out the stirrups to my saddle, and got on Bird. He tied old Bill's halter to the saddle horn, and started off.

"Good-bye, Ben," he called back, with a broad grin.

"Good-bye," I answered, rather feebly.

I stood and watched him as he jogged down the road. Once when Bird broke into a trot old Bill hung back lazily, and I knew that the halter was sawing over Hen's leg. Down the road they went, getting smaller and smaller, until at last the hills swallowed them up.

I looked on ahead in the direction they were taking. As far as the eye could see, the mountains stretched themselves out, ridge after ridge. And I knew that, far off over there, past the ridges and across the river, down by the mouth of Little Creek, was the old Baptist Manse.

I turned away slowly, my eyes filled with tears. It was the first time I had ever been homesick, and the strange poignant emotion almost overpowered me.

But in what seemed a very short time, I heard my train whistle up the track. Soon the little engine came puffing importantly around the curve. I had never been on board a train in my life, and the excitement of the moment blotted out all other thoughts. A brakeman in blue uniform called out:

"This train for Hamilton and Sistersville. All aboard!"

Sistersville! I heard him say it, and my thoughts ran on ahead. Sistersville—the outside world—an education—a future—and Margaret! I should soon be with Margaret. I settled down in my seat with a happy smile.

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY

A 000 038 754 8